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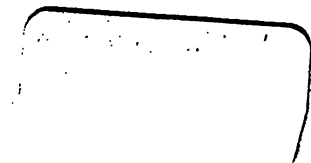
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THE SCORE

LUCAS MALET



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THE SCORE



THE SCORE

BY

LUCAS MALET

(MRS. MARY ST. LEGER HARRISON)

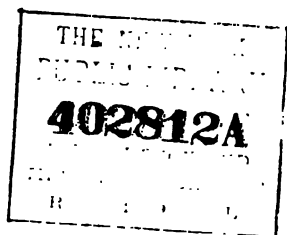
"For and against—how stands the score?"



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1909

THE
SCORE
1909



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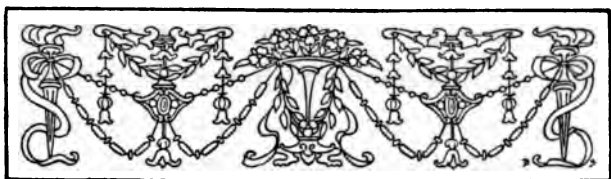
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CHAPTER I

IN that astonishing and apparently fortuitous seesaw, known as party politics the reaction had set in. So, at least, the younger and more sanguine members of His Majesty's Opposition maintained, pointing, in support of their assertion, to the results of various by-elections. The country, so they argued, being at bottom a by no means stupid country—though one profoundly averse to using its brains as long as that fatiguing, and doubtfully gentlemanlike, process can by any means be avoided—had wakened up, and was in the act of declaring its dissatisfaction with this great-cry-and-little-wool Government. Now the constituency of Westchurch—one of the very few manufacturing towns in the south of England,

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and heretofore conspicuously Radical and Non-conformist — had become vacant. If Westchurch, at this juncture, rallied to Imperialism and Tariff Reform, it would prove beyond all question that the reaction was fundamental, whereupon a mighty throwing up of caps and blowing of trumpets in the new moon would be justified. Lucius Denier, youngest brother of Lord Denier of Grimshott, stood in the Unionist interest. The influence of most of the local gentry, Lord Fallowfeild and Sir Richard Calmady among them, would be brought to bear on behalf of his candidature. So would that of Messrs. Image, the prehistoric firm of Westchurch brewers; Plaister & Sons, the world-famous seedsmen; Barstow & Fletcher, owners of the recently established motor-car works; Parsons Brothers, the electricians; and that of many of the leading shopkeepers — the latter alarmed into Unionism, irrespective of creed, by the costly antics of Radical finance. But the Labour vote — a very large one — taken as a whole, and that of the stricter Dissenters,

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remained hostile, only to be captured, if captured at all, by personal eloquence and personal magnetism. In how far Lucius Denier could lay claim to these persuasive gifts even his warmest advocates found it difficult to determine. For he was a young man not easily classified or labelled. He did not conform to any well-accredited British type, having a tendency to turn up, both intellectually and geographically, in unexpected places. Enthusiasts pronounced him an example of the typical man of the future. To which non-enthusiasts — these were unfortunately in the majority even among his avowed supporters — replied that in that case the typical man of the future promised to offer a not violently enticing compound of the bruiser and the prig.

Be this as it may, it happened that, on the day following the Westchurch election, Antony Hammond, a sturdy umbrella in one hand and a bundle of evening papers in the other, leisurely climbed the steep road leading from the last trees and houses of Compton Regis to the open down above.

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Like Hamlet—of doubtfully blessed memory, since his weaknesses and indecisions have proved the refuge and strength of so many generations of sentimentalists and deserters—Hammond was somewhat “fat and scant of breath.” But, let it be added, that in these physical characteristics alone did he resemble the everlasting Crown Prince of neurotics ; for, though years and weight had accumulated, he remained mentally and emotionally the agreeable Epicurean of earlier days. True to the teachings of his own light-hearted, slightly cynical philosophy, he continued to contemplate with unflagging curiosity the pageant of this imperfect world, which had, as he admitted, applauded his talents and condoned his errors with so admirable a liberality. Hammond, as time passed, had not deteriorated, for the simple reason that there was not enough of him, morally considered, to deteriorate. A walnut shell will ride out storms which send a battleship to the bottom. It is possible, moreover, to be essentially cold-blooded while displaying much superficial kindness of

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disposition, and a very lively appreciation of drama. Such a combination is of inestimable advantage to its lucky possessor ; upon whom it confers a reputation for sympathy while tending to personal security in delicate situations, and permitting a truly catholic enjoyment of all forms of art and aspects of the human tragi-comedy. One day, since only the creatures of fiction are after all immortal, the pleasant rooms in Green Street, the clubs, the Park, the restaurants, the stage box of many theatres, the drawing-rooms of many charming houses at home and abroad, in town and country, would know Antony Hammond no more. But until that day dawned — may it still be far distant ! — well-preserved, neat-featured, friend and confidant of a number of men and quite innumerable women, he will pursue his accustomed non-malign if non-heroic way — a modern pocket-Montaigne, a professional amateur, a permanently entertained and entertaining spectator.

At the top of the ascent he turned to the left, off the high road ; taking the coast-

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guard path which, skirting the cliff edge, showed like a frayed white ribbon against the glaucous green of the upland turf. In places it was bordered by fragrant beds of wild thyme, the red-brown and purple of which formed a rich undertone to the orange-scarlet of trefoil and pink candelabras of dwarf centaury. Far below lay the vast outstretch of opaline sea, crossed by wavering tide-lines of turquoise and sapphire. Far below, too, huddled in the green lap of the down, where it folded to the shore-level, lay the little watering-place, the colours of its stone and brick houses, churches, pier, and budding casino, softened in the shade to fine dove grey and burnt umber. The crude noises of it, too, what with exuberant holiday makers, four-horse brakes, bands, pleasure steamers, donkeys, dogs, and children innumerable, were softened by distance to a confused and not inharmonious murmur. White-sailed yachts and tan-sailed fishing-craft starred the surface of the bay. Along the horizon lay the smoke trail of an outward-bound liner. While to right and

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left of the hollow, where the little town centred, ghostly chalk cliffs, stained with pale heliotrope shadows, ranged away, their heads crowned by the grey-green turf, their feet planted in the yellow sand and shingle, up which long smooth-backed waves crept lazily to break in an iridescent glitter as of shattered glass. Over it all spread the fair still sunshine of a perfect afternoon in mid September.

A little way along the path Hammond paused, tucked the bundle of papers between his knees, and, raising his hat, discreetly mopped his forehead. He was not without a distinct share of self-respect or vanity — call it which you will — though his close-cut pointed blond beard was grizzled, and his waistcoats betrayed a degree of rotundity. The hotel — the steep violet and green slate roofs of which showed above the shoulder of the down — was still more than a quarter of a mile distant; and, though the air was fresh up here, the sunshine had power in it. Hammond wished to arrive at his destination in as good trim as might be, since a lady of considerable personal charms

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and a rather dangerously lively wit awaited his coming. During the last ten years or so he had watched the said lady's social and intellectual development with unceasing interest. She was indeed one of his most precious specimens. For, in addition to talent, she really had intellect—not only remarkable powers of observation, but the power to register the results of her observations and deduce conclusions therefrom. All was fish that came to her net in the way of subject-matter for reflection. Her common-sense commanded his unqualified admiration. It was prodigious—the common-sense of a worldling, but of a worldling with a soul and a heart. In truth, Hammond found her society so stimulating that there had been moments when possibilities of the tenderest description had presented themselves to him. Could it be that in her he had discovered the One Woman designed from all eternity to be his helpmate, the woman who during the—alas!—so many years of his earthly pilgrimage he had consistently sought and, so far, sought in vain?

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With dispositions at once exclusive and possessive he had fluttered round the brightness of her shining — was, in point of fact, so fluttering here and now, though he had the modesty to question whether, for all her declared friendliness, she was likely at this time of day to entertain his suit. And then, as he could not but admit, such ebullitions of desire were after all but transient and intermittent in character, the spirited allegro of his affections dying away into a mild adagio once again. So it had always been, with Antony Hammond, in his search for the One Woman. So, as he somewhat shamefacedly feared, it always would be.

The lady herself, however, appeared conveniently indifferent to these fluctuations, if, indeed, she troubled herself so far as to be aware of their existence. Many men buzzed about her, to Hammond's considerable annoyance, since it is natural to every man to detest the possible bridegroom, even while entertaining no practical designs upon the hand of the bride. The lady, it may be added, treated all her many admirers with the

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same easy and kindly gaiety. Her speech and manners were decidedly free, but her conduct so substantially correct that evil tongues were compelled to go back upon very ancient history for satisfaction of their malice. And all the while, notwithstanding the above-mentioned fluctuations in the temperature of his affections, the relation between her and Hammond remained a close and substantial one. He had reason to be grateful to her, for she had, unquestionably, been the instrument of his fame, carrying it not only through the length and breadth of our dear mother country, but spreading it across the great republic from New York to San Francisco; and giving his ingenious and sparkling comedies — by her inimitable interpretation of them — just that dash of hot blood, that pulse of vital humanity, which commands the sympathies of an audience, and in which, otherwise, they might have proved a trifle lacking.

It followed that Hammond on all counts — his affections to-day, it may be added,

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marched to the quicker beat—was anxious to preserve an unheated and dignified appearance on his return from Compton Regis. Meanwhile the panorama of land, sea and sky outspread before him well repaid a few moments' contemplation. It was, indeed, remarkably beautiful, the atmosphere being radiantly clear, the colour-effects of extreme delicacy, the whole touched with and expressive of a rare serenity. Yet—and of this Hammond was perfectly well aware, thanks to his dramatic sensibility—it was the evanescent delusive serenity of autumn embodying a spirit of questioning and unrest. A spirit which compels the birds of passage to flock, driven by the instinct of their approaching migration. A spirit rendering the soul of man restless likewise—driving him with vague nomadic memories out of the age-old past; haunting him with longings to force the gates of change and set forth upon some adventure—whether of travel, or art, or love, or warfare, matters little so long as the action be rapid and the scene be new.

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Hammond, it may be recalled in passing, was not only a playwright, but the author of more than one volume of refined and fluent verse. Now the poetic faculty stirred in him. Not that he had the smallest inclination actually to ride forth with high purpose of knight-errantry; but that the insidious autumn unrest constrained him to picture the noble joys of such riding, and further to picture the noble sorrow of the denial of such riding. Melodious lines began to evolve themselves, caressing his ear. Then, with a movement of slightly cynical amusement, he made return upon himself. For, when all is said and done, does not one of the chief advantages of the artistic temperament reside in precisely this gift of impersonal emotion, of subjective experience? Whereas, as he reflected, the unhappy ordinary mortal, to attain that emotion and sustain that experience, must positively and in his own private capacity suffer all the hard knocks, tears, agonies and desolations of which, in brutal fact, these are at once the product and the consequence.

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“A contemptibly clumsy arrangement,” he said to himself. “All the more credit then to thrice-sacred Art, since she enables one to give the slip to such miseries, compass the impossible—eat one’s cake and keep it, in short. Heaven help the poor wretches who are so meagrely constituted that they must gain their knowledge at first hand!”

Nevertheless, as he gazed away over the vast plain of opaline sea-floor, a passing doubt broke up the completeness of his self-sufficiency. For he remembered certain elect persons with whom it had been his privilege to be acquainted, and who, daring to live largely, not merely play at living, had now passed into the impenetrable silence of death. He thought of Philip Enderby, of Constantine Leversedge, of Kent Crooken-den, of Katherine Lady Calmady; and patronage of these, on his part, seemed to him a trifle too glaringly out of place.

“For, after all, who can tell?” he continued. “One has never been over the border, so the matter is insusceptible of proof one way or the other. And perhaps they

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were right. Perhaps they have their reward, a reward great as the substance is greater than the shadow."

Then, true to his negative philosophy, he made a second return upon himself.

"Always supposing there be any shadow or any substance—that both are not alike and equally the self-projected mirage with which man fondly strives to cheat his fear of everlasting nothingness, a dream within the universal dream."

He shrugged his shoulders with good-natured resignation—Why attempt to be wise above that which is written? Why strain after the unattainable? Where certainty is beyond the reach of human powers, cheerful acquiescence in our ignorance is clearly the part of sanity—and turned to pursue his journey along the coastguard path. But from afar a feminine voice hailed him, and upon the rounded grey-green slope of the down, in the direction of the hotel, a feminine form disclosed itself.

The lady was arrayed in a white serge

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yachting suit. She wore a burnt-straw beehive hat of generous proportions, a wreath of dull pink and mauve roses encircling the crown of it. A white scarf, strained over the top of it, was tied in a big soft bow under her chin. When Hammond first perceived her the long ends of the said scarf, caught by some vagrant breeze, floated out and upward like two semi-transparent wings. Tilted over her shoulder she carried a long-handled white parasol, the lining of which matched the tints of the roses in her hat. Following her, picking its way fastidiously over the short turf, came a minute shiny black blot, set on four slender fringed legs. The lady's face was pale; her eyes very dark and surprisingly large, her hair very dark too, dressed low in soft undulated masses upon her forehead and over her ears. And this darkness of hair and eyes, along with the blackness of the toy spaniel pricking after her, struck an arresting note, almost harsh as against her pallor and light-coloured clothing and those radiant immensities of land and sky and sea.

Hammond, notwithstanding the fluctuating temperature of his affections—possibly, indeed, precisely on account of those fluctuations—inclined, in respect of woman, to the Latin rather than the British attitude. He was innocent of that deep-seated—though usually quite unacknowledged—animosity towards the sex, veiled by affected contempt and based on prodigious and quite unaffected vanity, common to the majority of his countrymen. Honestly, he did not imagine, whenever a woman said a pleasant word or smiled upon him, that his freedom, or his virtue, or his pocket was thereby imperilled to any murderous extent. On the contrary every woman was interesting to him, the details and general effect of her appearance alike worthy of polite and respectful attention. He therefore permitted himself to stand still and watch Poppy St. John's advance with undisguised enjoyment. She walked admirably, her head carried proudly, her action suave, her movements conspicuously unhurried, her whole demeanour instinct with the delightful self-

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possession which at once courts and is careless of remark.

“Wake up, do! Step lively, dear man,” she cried, as soon as she came comfortably within earshot. “Doesn’t it occur to you you’re keeping me on tenterhooks? I see you’ve got them. Well, then, tell me the result. I suppose you’ve taken the trouble to look, and I’m simply bursting to know.”

“I am looking,” Hammond replied calmly; “but at something incomparably more agreeable to the eye than the columns of the evening papers. You are perfect like that. You ought to have been painted by Manet exactly as you are, in those clothes and against that background—a fine flower of contrast in sentiment and of sympathy in colour—an exquisitely civilised, exquisitely finished modern figure out in the open—art and nature pitted against one another. It is a poem full of endless suggestion. But there, bless my soul, what wonderful creatures you actor-ladies are! You work harder, live harder, than any class of educated women, tear your nerves to tatters with

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unlimited excitements, and yet keep your youth and — saving your presence — your contours as no other women living do ! ”

Poppy made a naughty mouth at him.

“ Oh ! la ! la ! ” she broke in impatiently, “ don’t fiddle while Rome ’s burning. It may do all very well in an emperor, but in an ordinary mortal it’s liable to become a howling nuisance. See here, are the numbers out ? Surely you have looked. Or are you trying to break my fall, and let me down easy ? Spare yourself the pains, my good dear. My nerves are pretty tough by now. I’ll engage to bear up. Too, I have always known it was a toss up. So shove along. Don’t funk it. Only let me hear.”

“ Eight hundred, or, to be perfectly accurate, seven hundred and ninety-eight — by the same token admire my praiseworthy self-abnegation in mastering the figures, I who detest arithmetic. Actually, for your charming sake I learned them by heart — seven hundred and ninety-eight majority.”

“ But, good heavens, which party, which ? ” she cried.

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Hammond dawdled over his answer. Her anxiety surprised and intrigued him a little.

"Oh! Unionist, naturally," he answered.

Poppy let drop her open parasol, which pirouetted and curtsied before it came to anchor, much to the disgruntlement of the tiny spaniel. It whined and shivered, fawning upon her. But she paid the little beast scant attention. She came and stood close beside Hammond, bending eagerly over the paper he held unfolded. Her cheeks were aglow.

"How sweet!" she said, quite gently. "Poor dear old Denny! How utterly sweet! Bless his heart. I am glad. Ye gods and little fishes, but I tell you I just am glad!"

She looked round at her companion, smiling, and patted him on the arm in the friendliest manner imaginable.

"Bless you, too, for bringing such good news," she continued; "though in the telling of it you have been own brother to the original slow-coach. Really you've made me awfully happy. It's good to know the poor dear boy's come through and is fairly

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started. I rather dreaded a failure for him. There's a freakish element in him which might make trouble. He might have taken failure badly, turned sour and got altogether too cranky by half. For he's the brains of one in a thousand; and the devil's always sitting around on the nearest fence, with his claws out ready to pounce on any extra special clever ones, such as Denny, if they get tripped in the running and a bit off the track. You see he's tremendously ambitious—Denny, I mean, not the devil—and will work like a steam roller give him something definite to work at. I had proof of that once. I found he had a splendid flow of language and of ideas; but no more conception of the technique of public speaking than a tom-cat. So I took him in hand and gave him some lessons in elocution, in emphasizing his periods and placing his voice. And I tell you I was touched by his teachableness, and the way he caught on and worked—great big hulking red-headed thing that he is." Poppy mused, her eyes full of kindness. "Yes, he ought to go far, with

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any decent sort of luck—very far, I think. Of course he's not much in your line, Antony, still you must see how clever he is. You believe in him, don't you?"

"Upon my honour, I have not the ghost of a notion whether I believe in him or not," Hammond returned, with raised eyebrows and rather irritating deliberation. "I am afraid I must plead guilty to an absence of any earnest consideration of Mr. Denier's possible future. On the one or two occasions upon which we have met he has given me to understand that he regarded me as a rather contemptibly battered old butterfly. He may be fully justified in his opinion, still it is hardly calculated to make for enthusiastic admiration on my part. You must admit he is a very strenuous young man, and I, avowedly, have no particular use for strenuous young men. Not my worst enemy has ever accused me of being strenuous."

"Would have been pretty mighty hard up for a lie if she had," Poppy put in.

"Pardon me, but why *she*?" Hammond asked.

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Poppy made a dive at the discarded parasol, which a wandering wind had valsed perilously near to the cliff-edge.

“Because one’s worst enemy is always a she, in my experience. If you’re a man, the woman who has wanted you and whom you’ve not wanted. If you’re a woman, well — yourself.”

And with that she tilted the errant parasol over her shoulder, and moved away, across the high-lying slope of turf towards the hotel and the sunset, followed by the minute and fastidious canine spot.

CHAPTER II

THE Chine Hotel at Compton Regis is a very up-to-date hostelry, where a few very highly complex persons go to live what they are pleased to call "the simple life"; and many conspicuously non-complex ones go, not without inward misgiving, to behold them living it. The hotel, a handsome stone structure, contains about two hundred rooms. A twenty-foot-wide glass-roofed verandah runs along the south front of it on the ground floor. The manager is German-Swiss. The catering and service are above reproach. The motor garage is ample. An eighteen-hole golf course is handy. There is a luxurious installation of electric and Turkish baths in the basement. Such details serve quite nicely to mitigate any too violent asperities of simple living. The steep chine

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at the head of which the hotel is situated, and from which it takes its name, is thickly clothed with scrub-oak and pine, furze, bramble, and bracken, right down to sea level. A row of striped bathing-tents are stationed upon the beach, with some half-dozen sea-going rowing-boats hauled up beside them.

To this agreeable spot Poppy St. John had retired for three weeks' rest and quiet, while studying the leading part in a play—entitled “From Bombay to Bayswater”—which Antony Hammond had lately written for her. And here, at her request, he had joined her to discuss the said play, write up some scenes and modify others in accordance with her suggestions. Being under no delusion as to the immortal quality of his works, and having, moreover, great confidence in Poppy's judgment, Hammond, as a rule, found himself quite willing to make such alterations as she might advise. Yet, since even the most accommodating of authors expects some slight recognition of his complaisance on the part of his critics,

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the completeness of Hammond's amiability suffered temporary eclipse upon the evening in question.

In his opinion, when she met him in the hall before dinner, Poppy should at once have expressed her satisfaction with certain cuts which, in obedience to her wishes, he had made in the second act. A good two hours ago, immediately on his return from his pilgrimage to Compton Regis, he had sent the corrected copy to her private sitting-room. She had had plenty of time in which to read it during the interval. But Poppy appeared incomprehensibly oblivious of her obligations towards him, as she swept along the wide corridor and into the great red-carpeted restaurant, threading her way deftly between the fifty-odd little white tables and their occupants to her own table, in the bay window, at the far end of the room.

At each meal in turn it diverted Hammond hugely to remark the attitude of the said occupants as his companion passed by. Vulgarity is the exclusive possession, in England, of no one class. It ranges freely

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up and down the social scale. Had Poppy St. John elected to make its acquaintance, the assembled company, individually and collectively, would have grovelled. Since, having her own affairs to attend to, she held aloof, it feared and envied while affecting to despise. Some ladies introduced a loud piercing quality, such as obtains among the fashionable in London omnibuses, into their voices. Others hastened modestly to study their plates. Some grew high-nosed and sniffy. Others embarrassed and pink. Middle-aged gentlemen puffed out their shirt-fronts like amorous pigeons, tried to look knowing, caressed their moustaches and cleared their throats. Youths furtively and sheepishly languished; or swaggered, assuming exaggerated effects of being more than altogether at their ease. Serious fathers of families boomed to their assembled wives and offspring, concerning the weather, the train-service, the marine flora and fauna of the district, any subject indeed of an unrelated and non-committal order which might chance to present itself to an infertile

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imagination under torment. A few young girls, innocent as yet of the world's unlovely standards, gazed with shy unqualified adoration at the passing vision. — Was n't she beautiful, famous? had n't they seen her portrait in dozens of picture-papers? — And upon these, as upon the waiters — also adoring — Poppy delightfully and indulgently smiled.

To-night the demonstration was accentuated, owing to the fact that she wore a surprising *Empire* tea-gown of the softest oyster-grey and peach-bloom brocade, a cunning little elbow-sleeved jacket to it, of old lace embroidered in diamond paste and pearls. Unlike a certain damsel — Hammond's relations with whom have elsewhere been chronicled — whose raiment had an evil habit of looking new without looking fresh, Poppy's garments had the excellent knack of looking fresh without looking new. Her personality was so far more important than anything she might wear, that her clothes, however ornate, however even amazing, remained merely a setting to it. On the present occasion the force of her

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personality was peculiarly evident, because her mood was unusually preoccupied, absorbed, and consequently forgetful of effects. The middle-aged gentlemen inflated their shirt-fronts more than ever in vain ; while even the young girls' ingenuous devotion remained unnoticed.

This accentuation of the daily comedy was not lost upon Antony Hammond. He relished it. In ministering to his amusement, it tended to smooth his slightly ruffled plumes. As, under a cross-fire of would-be withering glances, he followed the fair lady up the long room, he began to interpret her preoccupation in a manner complimentary to himself. Her mind was full of those alterations in the second act. She was working out the new possibilities they introduced into her part. The thought of the artist was wholly with her art. And this was pre-eminently as it should be, since, in the present instance, in relation to that art, he—Hammond—was the creator, she merely the executant. Hammond hugged himself. Verily there was much balm in

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Gilead, for it was no small satisfaction, after all, to have so remarkably attractive a woman as your exponent to the public and as mouthpiece of your ideas. Thus Hammond took his place opposite to her in the happiest disposition in the world, both for enjoyment of his dinner — a serious business with him — and for enjoyment of her conversation. But as her silence continued throughout the disposal of the *hors d'œuvres* and well away into the soup, he permitted himself to invite more direct acknowledgment and thanks.

“So the thing has really laid hold of you?” he said. “Delightful. I congratulate myself. I am extremely glad, really flattered that you should be so well pleased.”

Poppy looked at him across the little table, a crimson shaded electric lamp on her right hand, a vase of spidery French mari-golds, white daisies, and love-in-the-mist on her left, with an air of inquiry and slight surprise. It came over Hammond with a little chill that, however much she might have been thinking of that second act, she had

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certainly not been thinking very much about the writer of it. His self-esteem speedily received comfort, however, as her rather over-red lips and mournful eyes were lightened by a cordial, even affectionate smile.

“Upon my word, that’s awfully nice of you, Antony,” she said. “I did you an injustice. I thought you were a wee bit huffy. It’s generous of you to take it so sympathetically, specially after what you said on the other side. I own I am pleased; quite queerly much pleased. You see I have been working for it, one way and another in as far as I could, for this month of Sundays, and it’s very good to see the thing come through.”

Her manner was charmingly simple and sincere. It was Hammond’s turn to be slightly surprised. Really she was paying her little debt in the handsomest manner!

“You confound me with kindness,” he declared. “My small act of self-abnegation is unworthy of such royal recognition. Had I in the least realised you felt so strongly about the matter, it should have been carried

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out immediately. On no account would I have been guilty of dawdlings and delays."

"Does the original slow-coach rankle?" Poppy asked. "Forget it, *mon cher*, forget it. It was a slip of the tongue. For, after all, you deserved a minute or two to cool off in. I know that last bit of hill is a breather."

"Hill? Breather?"

Nothing was further from Hammond's desire than to give himself away; but the words shot out of him before he had time to stop them. In reply Poppy stared at him, her mouth round as an O. Then she sucked in her under lip and her eyes became infuriatingly merry.

"Dear man," she said, "I rend my garments—metaphorically speaking, of course, because this gown cost a cool thirty-five and we don't exactly know how long 'From Bombay to Bayswater' will run yet, do we?—But that's another story. I cast dust upon my head. All the same I'm afraid we're hunting two quite different hares. No doubt I am an owl; but I give you my word I have

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not the faintest notion what you are talking about. I was carolling over your truly angelic raid on the evening papers.— Don't refuse that sole à l'*Arlésienne*. I sent pretty messages to the *chef* about it by the head waiter the evening I came. The artist lives by applause, and that *chef* has moments of glorious inspiration.— Let me see, though, where were we?— Oh! yes, I was talking of your raiding the evening papers and of Denny's election."

"And I of my unhappy play, whose popularity you so heartlessly call in question."

The sole undeniably proved excellent, and Hammond made an effort to swallow his deception along with it. Nevertheless he was considerably irritated. The lady had made a fool of him—that was how he found it convenient to put the matter. No man, worthy the name, enjoys being made a fool of. He owed it to himself to bring her to book.

"With a lamblike docility I disembowelled that second act in submission to your ruling,

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sacrificing some of my noblest periods upon the altar of our friendship."

"Did he, then — did he?" Poppy crooned soothingly. "How pathetic!"

"It is," Hammond asserted. "For your sake I suffered. Think of it, and thinking turn your eyes from beholding frivolity. Forget the futile strife of political parties. What the deuce does it matter which party is nominally in power? The fate of the country is decided, as the real work of it is done, not by the occupants of the Treasury Bench or their supporters, but by a handful of modest permanent officials. 'The one remains, the many change and pass,' as Shelley — isn't it? — sings in quite another connection. Why then concern yourself with any shuffling of perches among the inmates of the national parrot-house at Westminster? Come back to things of gravity and stable importance—to my play, namely. In respect of that second act my conduct has been absolutely saintly. It caused me bitter pangs to curtail the ex-Commissioner's speech about the dawk-bungalow, the Notting-Hill-Gate

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'bus, and the cobras. You pronounced it irrelevant, said it delayed the action unduly. Yet it was witty. It made you laugh. Indubitably it was witty. And it is not given to every man or to every play to be witty. Ah! what a different world this fallen world would be were they so — either or both! Hence the sweet reasonableness of my conduct deserves enthusiastic commendation. Clearly it is your place to be touched; to be impressed by it. Above all to be grateful — remember the Notting-Hill-Gate 'bus and those delicious cobras — and to give voice to that gratitude here and now."

In response Poppy spread abroad her hands and folded them upon her bosom with the most engagingly appealing and penitent gesture — thereby provoking repetition of the comedy of covert repudiation, covert admiration, alarm, and frantic desire to hear and know without appearing to do either, on the part of the occupants of the neighbouring tables.

"I ask ten thousand pardons, Antony," she said. "But truth compels me to own

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I have not read that reconstructed second act. I am a graceless wretch, a veritable toad; but, honour bright, I had n't time to read it."

"Oh!"—Hammond lengthened out the monosyllable. "And may I presume to ask why?"

"Why? Because I'd other things to do—of course."

"What other things?"

"Eh, eh!" she said, drawing herself up while her eyes grew slightly vicious—"since when have you acquired the right to cross-examine me as to the occupation of my time, I should like to know?"

"I merely obey the instinct of paternity. I strive to protect my young from neglect—in this case my latest born, my poor puling infant 'Bombay to Bayswater.'"

Poppy settled herself back in her chair. "The House of Commons may be a ship of fools," she began, with dignity.

"It is," Hammond chorused.

"All the same, a very tidy number of very tidy people are jolly anxious to get

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on board of it. It doesn't matter very much what your business in life is, it seems to me," she continued, ignoring the interruption, "whether you're an emperor or a knacker — if you find yourself in it and it gives you your opportunity."

"Hear, hear!" from Hammond. "Precisely my contention. Hence my attitude regarding the infant 'Bombay to Bayswater.'"

"The Westchurch racket has given Lucius Denier his opportunity — opened the door wide on it, anyhow."

"Doubtless, most wise lady. All the same, my little Bombay and I have the prior claim on your time and sympathy."

"Opens the door on it anyway," Poppy repeated. "But it remains to be seen whether he is level-headed enough to make the most of his opportunity. I believe he is. Only he's freakish at times, as I told you. He might fly off at a tangent. He needs rounding up, and steadying. So I could not trouble about anything else this evening. I had to sit down and write him

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a three-sheet letter of good advice, poor dear old boy.”

Again Hammond gave a long-drawn meditative oh!—“Yet, yet I had to fetch the evening papers? Singular. He had not telegraphed to you, then?”

The corners of Poppy’s mouth turned down wickedly.

“Do you know, you strike me as uncommonly inquisitive? Why the goodness-gracious should he telegraph to me?”

“To a simple-minded onlooker it might not seem out of the part that the young man should hasten to acquaint his Egeria with this thrice-happy issue,” Hammond replied, lightly. “But ‘other times other manners’; and those of to-day, I admit, are not distinguished for ceremonious courtesy.”

Then, as his companion vouchsafed no response to this last sally, Hammond proceeded to consume the next course in silence. On the removal of his plate, he picked up and abstractedly studied the menu. He was still irritated, still thirsty for delicate

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revenge. But he was more than just that. For he had received an agitating impression, which while sharply arousing his curiosity, also engendered a suspicion that Poppy had been guilty of making—and that for some time past—a very much greater fool of him than it had ever entered his head to imagine. He scented complications and developments, and he didn't like them in the least. During the recent conversation he had merely been playing, teasing her; but had she merely been playing? Was there not more than met the eye in this warmly expressed interest of hers in Lucius Denier? What was the real character of her relation to the man? How immensely he wanted to know, yet how utterly impossible to ask her! Hammond's gaze remained glued to the menu. The whole affair found him wholly unprepared. He had never suspected anything in that particular direction. His curiosity stood on tiptoe; while—since jealousy is the sharpest of whips—he found the mildly ambling pace of his affections incontinently break into a headlong gallop.

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Poppy, meantime, had turned her mirthful melancholy eyes upon the surrounding company; at first idly, her thought being elsewhere. But soon, as her glance travelled from face to face and group to group, the very nullity of the effect of all these, her fellow-creatures, compelled her attention. That they should matter so very little, in a way mattered so very much. Their obvious self-consciousness, their conventionality of looks and demeanour, their lack of intelligent conversation, their fear of compromising themselves by affirmation in any shape or form, hit one in the face, so to speak. To live for no more than that, and, great Heavens, to be satisfied with such a paucity of living, with birth behind and death in front of you! — Were they alive, though, after all? She had a naughty longing to pinch them, just to see if they would scream. — The close proximity of all this vegetative, steadily-feeding humanity got upon her nerves. The mighty orchestra of earthly existence played such very other music to her! Was she mad, then, with her supersensitive-

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ness to the drama of every hour ; or were they mad, with their lethargic insensibility to it ? That both she and they should be equally in their sane and sober senses seemed incredible. The whole thing became too perplexing for words — enough to give one an acute attack of indigestion. Poppy, her pretty nose in the air, swept the great room with half-pitying, half-scornful glances, shrugged her shoulders while the diamond points on her lace jacket darted and quivered under the electric light, surveyed Hammond critically, playing a sharp little tattoo with the tips of her fingers upon the table meanwhile to arrest his attention. This last move failing:—

“Antony,” she said at last, and imperatively.

“I beg your pardon,” he inquired, but without looking up.

“Aren’t you tired of reading about your dinner yet ? Perhaps you’re learning the names of the dishes by heart, as you so nobly did the figures of the Unionist majority at Westchurch. It is a good thing to exer-

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cise the memory, only it is a thing best done in private, in leisure moments. I'm here, don't you see — here, plumb in front of you. And I am a little liable to be bored. I'm accustomed to be attended to. Wake up, there's a good dear — don't sulk. It does n't suit your blond debonair plump — yes, just slightly plump — style of manly beauty. Besides, it's silly. I've not really neglected the infant Bombay, but just held him over, bless him, till I could give him my whole-hearted, undivided attention. The delay was a compliment in disguise, that's all. I'll read the second act through before I go to bed, I promise you. Now, *mon cher*, cease to act ugly — emerge, root and branch, from those silly old sulks."

"I am not sulking," Hammond returned calmly. "Far from it. I am seriously and scientifically engaged. I am doing my utmost to diagnose an obscure and difficult case."

"What case?"

Hammond looked up. For a moment he paused, wondering how near he dared venture to that tormenting leading question.

“ A very obscure and difficult one,” he repeated. “ You could throw a lot of light on it if you chose to do so. You could be a prodigious help. You could, indeed, set my anxieties and perplexities finally at rest. It would be a good action, a merciful action ; but I am afraid you will refuse to commit it.”

“Why, your own,” Hammond smiled disarmingly at her — “your own, most dear lady, and that of our successful political candidate — of Mr. Lucius Denier.”

“Ah! you are sulking,” she cried. “I have told you I’ll read the plaguy thing before I go to bed. Won’t that satisfy you? We shall have all to-morrow in which to

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discuss it. The third act can stand. So can the fourth in the main. I am bound to say that you are happier than most modern English authors in your fourth acts. In this one you steer clear of any trace of anti-climax. Indeed, the play's an admirable piece of construction. It walks straight through from start to finish, bar one or two irrelevancies which I have marked. Honestly, you've never done anything better. In my opinion you have gained in breadth of treatment without losing what I may call your intimacy—and it is the intimacy of real people in real life, not the conventional English stage idea of intimacy. Familiarity—you know—horrible—quite another pair of shoes—pah!" Then she added, with apparent inconsequence—"There's no case."

"Oh! pardon me, but there is," Hammond asserted. "And it poisons the sunshine of even your charming compliments to my little Bombay, in the warmth of which I should otherwise, just now, so ecstatically bask."

For her praise had raised the temperature

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of his affections to boiling-point. With that unaccustomed glow of colour in her cheeks she had looked distractingly seductive. And then what an actress, what an artist she was! Perish the thought of anything, anybody, which might come between her and her art; between her and him — Antony Hammond — between her and those, thanks to her, space-conquering little plays of his! — “Your sympathy for the strenuous young gentleman and his affairs is entirely too lively for my comfort,” he continued. “Frankly, I want every scrap of it for myself. A three-page letter! It is unpermissible, almost immoral, suggestive of the most detestable, the most disintegrating possibilities.”

Poppy clicked her tongue against her palate after the manner of offensive small boys.

“La! la! la! what a dear old silly-billy you are!” she said. “Why, as you pointed out to me with such delicate tact, Denny did n’t even telegraph. He is to me as a callow nephew, my good soul. I am to him as a hoary maiden aunt.”

“Oh! come, come,” Hammond exclaimed,

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“that won’t do — I only wish it would. Whatever his talents or his disabilities, this budding prime minister must be on the wrong side of thirty if he’s a day!”

“I’m jolly well on the wronger side of it, worse luck. And then, after all, you know, age is purely subjective in persons of temperament.”

“That statement cuts both ways, unfortunately,” Hammond put in.

“I give you my word it is simply a question of friendship—unadulterated friendship.”

“A blind,” he answered, “a futile and feeble blind. You know just as well as I do that between man and woman unadulterated friendship is as the fourth dimension, a thing outside nature, monstrous, unthinkable, grotesque.”

“I know that a person of your intelligence ought to be ashamed of trotting out that stale old gibe at this time of day,” Poppy declared with spirit. “There’s a lot of good honest friendship between men and women up and down the world now, if there never

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was before. I'm not crazy on modernity, the New Woman, and all that rot, Heaven knows; but one of the real gains of all that movement is such friendship, and I am no end thankful for it. It helps to keep life clean and keep it amusing too, and I doubt if real cleanliness is possible between human beings if you drop amusement out. Laughter is the best preventive, as far as my experience carries me, against morbidness; and morbidness in the finish, be it never so refined and intellectual, invariably spells dirt.—Friendship between man and woman! I should just think there was. If there isn't, what about us two, for instance, about you and me?"

Hammond clasped his hands and leaned forward across the little table. It was abominably dangerous. He was about to mortgage his whole future and in a sense to invalidate his whole past. He recognised that. An hour hence he would, in all probability, be desperately repentant. Yet he really could not help himself. His affections boiled over at last.

"Don't take my name in vain in this

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connection, please," he said, "most dear lady. As to the character of the sentiment which unites us, speak for yourself only, if speak so cruelly you must — speak only for yourself!"

But Poppy had suddenly sprung to her feet. She drew back a little, her eyes wide with unfeigned, unqualified astonishment, one hand over her mouth, the other at her side, yet pointing across the width of the great lofty crowded room.

"Holy mother of Moses!" she said, under her breath. "What in the name of reason does it mean? Why, there — there he is!"

CHAPTER. III

HAMMOND, checked in mid career, so to speak, confounded alike by his companion's words and attitude, and by a silence suddenly pervading the whole company, got upon his feet with most unusual celerity, and faced about to discover the cause of these disquieting phenomena. He received a singular impression.

All heads, like those of a flock of startled sheep, were turned in one direction; waiters paused, staring, oblivious of their duties. While, on the threshold of the high French window opening on to the verandah, the soft gloom of the night affording a relatively dark background to his figure, a man stood, whose appearance offered an arresting contrast to the garish brightness of the restaurant and evening dress of its

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occupants. At first sight Hammond took him for an artisan or mechanic on the tramp for work, if not for some rougher character, his bearing being far from pacific. He was dusty, travel-stained, his face lined, his expression at once ardent and weary. There was, indeed, an effect of urgency trenching upon violence in his aspect, as of one who has lately endured the strain of rude events and is a prey to fierce and primitive emotions. The fronts of his frieze blanket-lined great-coat gaped apart, showing trousers tucked into high brown butcher boots. In one hand he dangled an old cloth cap and grey mask, the glass eyepieces of which, reflecting the dazzle of the electric lights, took on a rather ghastly semblance of life and observation. With his other hand, held high and horizontally, he shaded his eyes from the glare, while his glance searched the room from corner to corner. In person he was tall, a good six foot and over, large-boned, thickly not to say coarsely built. His face was indicative of remarkable, even sinister, contradictions. The upper portion of it—

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high narrow forehead, slightly aquiline nose with wide-winged nostrils, deep-set hungry light blue eyes— was that of an idealist, even of a visionary. But the lower portion of it— long upper lip, hard straight mouth with no curves to it, under jaw prominent and heavy to the point of quite conceivable brutality— was that of a born fighting man, a fighter, moreover, with not the most dainty of weapons, a cudgel rather than a rapier. He was clean shaven, his fair skin tanned to a dull brick-dust colour, his hair, just now none of the smoothest, a darkish chestnut red. In fine, force rather than discipline, arrogance rather than leniency, was the predominant note.

For a long minute he stood stock still, save for the motion of the hand dangling the ugly motor mask, while his glance travelled boldly, carefully, from table to table. In the prevailing stillness, the long-drawn hush of breaking waves on the shore far below, and the rustle of the night wind in the pine and oak scrub clothing the chine, became delicately, wistfully audible. But

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soon the interrupted commonplaces of a *table d'hôte* reasserted themselves, along with vague murmurings against this uncouth intrusion upon the solemnities of a good dinner. Waiters, recovering themselves, hurried forward, though acutely uncertain as to whether they were called upon summarily to eject or obsequiously to welcome the new comer—who, if he were not a wholly disreputable person, must clearly be a notably important one. On their approach, however, the young man waved them aside with a contemptuous impatience agreeably reassuring to their social sense; while, having at length sighted, as it would seem, the object he was in search of, he crossed the threshold and swung away up the great room.

“Ah!” Hammond said softly, “I fancy I begin to understand. Our budding premier in person! But why this extremely volcanic entrance? There are doors as well as windows. There are also clothes pegs, on which it is customary to hang superfluous outer garments when grubby.”

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His feelings were decidedly mixed, but he had regained his composure and usual bantering manner. He turned to Poppy as he spoke. He met with no response. Her lips were parted, her teeth set, her eyes fixed with strained intensity upon the approaching figure. Her expression, as Hammond reflected, might be one of triumph. It might equally be indicative of rather deadly fear. He watched and listened, conscious of growing excitement. "Though in either case," he said to himself, "it is unflatteringly obvious that I shall be called upon to take a back seat."

"But it's all right about the Westchurch election?" This from the fair lady, breathlessly and without any preliminaries of greeting.

"Righter than right."

"Then how the dickens have you managed to get away?"

"How the dickens was anybody to stop me?"

Denier's tone was at once defiant and

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oddly nervous. His lips twitched. His eyes pleaded for indulgence.

“Urgent private affairs — that was sufficient. The inhabitants of Westchurch are beginning to know better than to interfere with me and my plans unless they are compelled to do so. I have got them well in hand. They do as they are bid. They were up the greater part of the night punching each other’s wooden heads, cheering and booing. I told them that they needed rest after such sustained intellectual and moral effort. I bade them go to bed early to-night, Free Traders and Tariff Reformers alike, to sleep off the effects of defeat, or victory, and their bruises.”

The young man talked rapidly, almost incoherently, just for the sake of talking, while his lips twitched and he looked down at Poppy St. John with those tired, anxious, hot light-blue eyes.

“In any case,” he added, more slowly, “I meant to come, dear. So, of course, I came.”

On her part, Poppy stood very erect, her

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hands at her sides, looking up at him, for he towered above her. And to Hammond it seemed that, as she looked, the triumph gained and the fear faded in her face. He had often doubted whether, upon the stage, she could justly be described as a beautiful woman. He no longer doubted that, off it, she could, on occasion, be an astonishingly beautiful one. Just now he found her little short of magnificent, with her dark hair and pale skin, dark shining eyes and pale shining jewelled silk raiment. He had never — not even during his recent moment of boiling-over affections — admired her half so much; nor had she ever caused him such intense provocation, since he recognised that he mattered not one little bit, that nobody indeed mattered save this volcanic — he itched to say melodramatic, but honesty constrained him to own that adjective a libel — this volcanic young idealist prize-fighter of a politician. And the meaning of it all. For the tone of Denier's last little speech was furiously intriguing. What was the actual relation between them? That question pre-

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sented itself in an aggravated form, while the solution of the riddle appeared more obscure than ever.

In their diverse capacities either of the couple was well accustomed to face an audience. They faced it now, but with an unconcern, an obliviousness of its existence eminently the reverse of complimentary. Nothing is so unpardonable as to be forgotten. Better, says natural vanity, be remembered with curses than not remembered at all. Hammond became conscious that the assembled company, while unwillingly sharing his excitement, richly shared his provocation. Did not the absorption of these two persons in one another constitute an insult to its own importance? Still, the first moment of startled sheeplike paralysis over, it did its best to recover its British phlegm, conceal its curiosity and declare its resentment by booming and shrilling, eating and drinking the longer and louder. Hammond was diverted, yet inwardly he applauded, for were not he and it rather humiliatingly in the same boat? Neverthe-

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less there were dissentients. Of this too he was conscious, and it by no means lessened his irritation. One or two calm-faced matrons, and the adoring maidens aforesaid, were not on the side of the majority. Their hearts indeed went out strongly to the culprits, driven in the one case by shy and exquisite hopes, in the other by tender and poignant memories; since they knew intuitively, simply by knowing, that alongside this roughly-clad masterful stranger the great god of love, Eros himself, had stepped out of the fair autumn night and in at the restaurant window, and they worshipped, awed yet enchanted by the splendour of his mysterious presence and the rush of his unseen feet.

“I wired directly I got the news,” Poppy said. Her lips were unsteady too, and her face had grown very soft and youthful in its triumph. “And I wrote, Denny—a thousand-mile-long all-wise letter.”

“Oh! well, they will keep,” he answered. “I shall find them safe enough when I get back to-morrow morning. I have a com-

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mittee-meeting at nine-thirty, worse luck. Meanwhile this is better—is n't it?"

"Shade of unadulterated friendship!" murmured Hammond, raising his eyes piously.

But neither of the couple paid the faintest attention to him. Poppy pressed the palms of her hands together, laughing quietly.

"But, dear old boy, how the etcetera can you get back by then?" she asked.

"Quite easily. We did the run under the three hours coming down. I did not get off till nearly six; but the car behaved like an angel. She understood—and I just let her rip. That poor brute Turquand said his prayers pretty fervently at the cross-roads, I fancy; but he knows it is as much as his place is worth to remonstrate, so he sat tight and swallowed behind his goggles. I slowed-up through the villages. We committed no murders, not even hen-slaughter, and it was the heaviest part of the day for traffic. In the early morning the roads will be clear and I can push the pace."

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For the first time he took his eyes off Poppy and glanced at the table.

“That reminds me,” he went on, “I got no luncheon to speak of, and have a positively wolfish hunger on me in consequence. Can I have something to eat?”

“You poor dear, of course you can!” she answered, in mothering accents.

“You’re sure you don’t mind my dining as I am, in this savage road-kit?—All right, then. Here, waiter, take my coat and things. Bring me some soup—be sure it is hot.”

And thereupon, with the utmost sang-froid he prepared to appropriate Hammond’s vacant place. Realising suddenly that it had already been occupied, he looked blankly at Poppy in sharp inquiry, woeful disappointment and disgust. Then, perceiving and recognising Hammond, he pulled himself together. His whole aspect changed. All nervousness left him. The idealist, with anxious pleading eyes and twitching lips, vanished; while his countenance hardened,

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coarsened even, the heavy jaw becoming aggressively prominent, the mouth relentless.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I had supposed we were alone. Mr. Antony Hammond? — Yes, I believe we have met."

"Unquestionably we have," Hammond put in, with malicious suavity and politeness. "And I gladly embrace this opportunity of renewing our acquaintance and presenting my congratulations upon the successful conclusion of your recent parliamentary campaign. You have cause to feel elate, for in the words of the little poem which we all — all three probably, notwithstanding differences of age and sex — learned in our tender and ingenuous youth, 'it was a glorious victory.'"

"It was a victory of common-sense over inflated lies and rottenness," Denier replied harshly, between his spoonfuls of soup. "Whether it can be called glorious or not remains a matter of opinion, I suppose. There is a not inconsiderable section of the British public, given to lauding its own high-souled patriotism and distinguished

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intelligence, which pins its faith to lies and rottenness. The Westchurch election has, I believe and hope, hammered more than one nail into its private coffin, for which I am devoutly thankful. But pardon me, Mr. Hammond; I know nothing about your politics. Perhaps you belong to that camp?"

"Oh! Antony belongs to no camp," Poppy declared gaily. She had seated herself again, and folded her arms upon the edge of the table. She leaned forward, glancing mischievously from one man to the other. It would be inconvenient to have them really quarrel; yet, both her sporting instinct and her womanhood could not but hail signs of a fight, whereof she was herself at once the cause and, in a sense, the prize. — "He belongs to no camp," she repeated. "That's the unique use and beauty of him—precisely what we keep him for, in short. He's as innocent of convictions, bless him, as an egg is of feathers. Think how restful! — Toast? why, my dear, there it is right in front of you. — In that particular — the ab-

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sence of convictions, I mean, not the desire for toast—his society supplies an excellent antidote to yours, Denny.”

“How fortunate!” Denier said, eating steadily.

“For example,” she continued, “he has just cut great chunks out of the second act of the little lamb of a new play he’s written for me, and which he’s down here to discuss, in deference to my wishes. There’s amiable pliability if you like! You’d never have done that, Denny.”

“Emphatically I should not,” Denier said, still eating.

“And I, like a monument of ingratitude, was so occupied with the thought of you and the Westchurch racket, that I never gave him a syllable of thanks. The barometer, at the beginning of our dinner to-night, stood at anything but set fair in consequence. He was abominably injured. The skies, indeed, had only just partially” — she put out the extreme tip of her tongue, glancing sideways at Hammond — “partially, I repeat, begun to clear, when your great

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self so amazingly romped in. — By the way, my dear, what will you drink?"

"Water," Denier said hoarsely.

"But, my good child, why? Is this also political? I thought the brewers and wine and spirit merchants were solid on the Unionist ticket. Since when, and why then, have you turned teetotal?"

The young man looked up at her, his expression grim, his eyes resentful yet full of desperate longing.

"You forget I have to drive the car back in the small hours, and that I shall have had no sleep."

Poppy took her arms off the table, and sat upright. The naughty mirth had gone out of her face. The triumph had gone too; only the fear was left—so at least it appeared to Hammond—and lay like a dense grey veil upon her, obscuring her brilliance and her beauty.

"I forget nothing, Denny," she said rapidly in a low voice. "Nothing bad or good. I wish to Heaven, often enough, that I did."

Denier made no reply, but the blood

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rushed into his face and neck, then ebbed, leaving his skin bleached notwithstanding its tan. He threw back his head, took a long drink of water, wiped his mouth with his napkin, bent down and went steadily, doggedly, on with his dinner.

Whereupon that perturbing question as to the real nature of the relation existing between these two persons presented itself to Hammond's mind in an aggravated form, clamouring more loudly than ever for answer. Superficially they were so amazingly frank. Substantially they were so distractingly reticent. He could make neither head nor tail of the situation. Just now they had been guilty of a slip, been on the edge of a revelation—so he fancied. But they promptly recovered themselves. His excitement was intensified, yet he was, he admitted, as far from a solution as ever.

Meanwhile the hour grew late and the restaurant was beginning to empty. Self-consciously, and not without remonstrant backward glances, the company arose and filed away—the greater number to play

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little games and gossip little gossips in the spacious public rooms of the hotel; the lesser number to eat the air and contemplate nature from under the sheltering glass roof of the verandah. Yielding to an impulse, whether of generosity or conscious impotence he refused to determine, Hammond rose too. It was not that his interest faltered; but his nerve gave—just a little. The atmosphere had become too electric for comfort. Something was about to happen. He might delay that happening by his presence; but he could not alter the event in the very least. Unwillingly he admitted this man and woman were stronger than he was—so much stronger that either they would wait till he had gone, however long he might delay his going, or would tell him in plain language to go, which last would be awkward and very unpleasant. And then his radical good nature had a word to say. After all, why torment them further? Neither the beat of his affections—which had declined to an adagio somehow—nor his love of reprisals justified his tormenting

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them further; still less did it justify risk to himself of humiliating dismissal. Prudence is the better part of valour—he would cultivate that estimable if slightly *bourgeois* virtue, retire in good order and at once.

“You will forgive my leaving you, dear lady,” he said in tones of affectionate intimacy. “Reluctantly I tear myself away from your delightful presence. But even obscure persons like myself have business obligations to fulfil at times—letters, in this case, which ought, in decency to my correspondents, to catch the early post. Happily, as you just now reminded me, we have all to-morrow to devote to the manipulation of that second act. *À demain* then—good-night.”

With that he turned leisurely to the young man, looking him up and down with an effect of covert and slightly ironical amusement.

“Farewell, Mr. Denier,” he went on. “Our conversation has been brief, still to me it has been highly instructive. I shall

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look for your future utterances with interest, assured that they will never err on the side of advocating a negative and colourless policy. *Bon voyage*, then—publicly, in respect of your crusade against lies and rottenness in the affairs of the State; and mechanically, in respect of your impending, and, I fear, necessarily somewhat fatiguing, gallop inland through the night.”

Denier stood up and moved a step aside, placing one large sinewy hand upon the back of Poppy St. John’s chair. He looked Hammond very straight in the eyes, his expression the reverse of conciliatory.

“Many thanks,” he said. “I have every intention of carrying both matters through to my own satisfaction. It is not my habit, Mr. Hammond, to give up anything which I propose to have or propose to do. I am not addicted to retrogressive movements, in other words to turning tail.”

“Oh! you will arrive,” Hammond replied, nodding airily to him. “I entertain no fears as to the final event. Only where will you arrive, and when? The road may have

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unexpected, not to say disconcerting, little turns in it. Even the greatest of men occasionally find themselves obliged — yes, obliged — to drive round rather than to drive through obstacles. — But in any case *bon voyage* — good-night."

CHAPTER IV

THE young man stood watching Antony Hammond's eminently gentlemanlike, if somewhat portly back, while waiters moved to and fro silently clearing the tables. In the stillness the whisper of the night wind and long-drawn sibilant murmur of breaking waves, far below on the beach, once more became audible. Denier was dog-tired, overstrung, and consequently unreasoningly sensitive to impressions. He found a haunting sadness in the sound of the wind and the sea, while Hammond's parting words held something of a menace; and, notwithstanding his abundant self-reliance, these things affected him with premonition of coming trouble. Heretofore, in as far as he had condescended to think about Antony Hammond at all, he had done so in a spirit of comfortable contempt. Now contempt changed to detesta-

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tion. He had counted on finding Poppy St. John alone. That this man should be with her constituted not only an offence, but awoke in him suspicion and anxiety. What exactly did it mean? What, too, did Hammond mean by that note of menace or warning? Denier had been madly impatient for his departure. But now that Hammond had departed all his former nervousness returned upon him.

A good minute or more passed before he could trust himself to look at Poppy St. John. He stood behind her shivering, partly from sheer physical exhaustion, partly from the strain of mental and emotional tension. Then he braced himself fiercely, taking a deep breath while his grip tightened on the back of her chair. Looking down, he became aware that nervousness had gained the lady also. She leaned forward, her elbows planted on the table, her chin in the hollow of her hands. Her breath came short, making the jewels of her lace jacket dart and flicker as her bosom rose and fell. Below the soft dense masses of

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her hair the nape of her neck showed ivory white. A subtle enfolding sweetness exhaled from her. Denier was glad he had only drunk water. He did not, like Hammond, admit the impossibility of asking leading questions. Where matters of vital importance to himself were concerned a too scrupulous delicacy would never stand in his way. He meant to ask a rather desperate leading question now ; but to do so effectively needed, as even he perceived, a cool and steady head.

“ Surely,” he began, “ surely that barrel-shaped elderly philanderer cannot enter to any serious extent into your present interests or future plans ? ”

Poppy stiffened sensibly, but she did not look up.

“ In the matter of £ s. d. most extensively seriously,” she answered ; “ since he writes the parts which I subsequently and so unselfishly create.”

“ I was not thinking of money, or plays, or parts,” Denier said.

“ Then your wits were wool-gathering, my

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dear child, to an extent which does both you and them small credit."

A silence followed, which Denier broke with rather brutal directness.

"Do you mean me to understand that there is nothing — nothing — between you and him?"

Poppy raised her head, her great eyes sombre with pain and resentment.

"There are over ten years of courtesy and kindly deeds and honest good comradeship between us," she said. "I don't know whether your experience of the ways of the world has been so idyllic that you reckon that as nothing. To me it seems a good deal."

"But ——" he insisted.

"But—but—don't be a crass idiot, Denny," she broke out hotly.

And thereupon she dropped her chin into the hollow of her hands again, humping up her shoulders queerly, a positively mulish obstinacy in the set of her whole charming figure. Observing which, Lucius Denier slipped back into his place at table. His

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throat was dry. The blood thumped in his temples. Yet he was comparatively at ease once more—that same queer mulishness of attitude carrying conviction of the speaker's sincerity. But it was characteristic that he offered no sort of apology for his onslaught. He had got that which he wanted. It was enough. He left the next move to her. It was equally characteristic that Poppy, pushed by native and reckless generosity, made that next move without any very protracted delay.

“For goodness' sake don't let us quarrel about anything so imbecile,” she said. “I hate quarrelling. It leaves a bad taste in my mouth for days afterwards; and it is obviously silly to take over a hundred miles' run and lose a night's rest simply to produce that result.—I am very fond of Antony—in his place well understood—always shall be. He and I constitute a mutual benefit society. Our names will go down to posterity hand in hand—if posterity troubles its head about either of us, which is a very open question I imagine.—So things are, my dear boy,

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and if you don't like them you must jolly well lump them — for if I have done something to make Antony's reputation, he's at least done as much to make mine."

"There I disagree," Denier put in. "He owes everything to you. But whether your genius would not have found a fuller and richer development if it had not been caged within the four corners of his plays I doubt. I shall always have a grudge against those plays, because I think they have tended to limit you. I am not prejudiced——"

"Indeed—aren't you?" Poppy said softly. Her downcast eyes had begun to mock again, her voice to tease.

"No, I am not," Denier repeated. "I am quite ready to admit they have both literary and dramatic merit of a kind. They are good as far as they go. All the same they are a slight frothy stuff, quite inadequate to the fulness of your powers. In relation to all the greater human problems they never come near touching bottom."

"And who asks that they should touch bottom?" Poppy inquired. "Not the aver-

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age English playgoer. The last thing he or she requires is to be made to think. So what's the use of stirring up the flooring of the four-mile-deep, and sending all the sea-serpent brood thrashing up to the surface? Nobody will thank you for doing so. Nobody wants the sea-serpent, or wants to believe in his existence in these days. They'll only perjure themselves by swearing he's an optical delusion, because they are so horribly afraid he may be real." She glanced at Denier under her drooping eyelids, her chin still resting in her hands. "That's the worry with you, Denny," she went on. "You're a lot too fond of starting the sea-serpent in some form or other; and it does n't pay, my dear child, it does n't pay. Leave the greater human problems severely alone in all departments if you want to be popular, but specially in fiction and the drama, and in politics too. Stick to the shop windows and you'll tickle the taste of the crowd — to the last cry in millinery and millionaires and patent medicines; in corsets and coro-

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nets; with samples of justifiable homicide—of which nobody dies—thrown in by way of a relish, and a few *crimes passionnels*, which prove of course in the finish to be as sweetly devoid both of crime and passion as they are devoid of probability. Let nothing, nothing ring true—that's the receipt for a roaring success just now, the trick to wake the applause and rake in the dollars. And what but the applause and the dollars," she added, bitterly, "after all matter one smallest scrap?"

The young man's face flushed up to the roots of his red-brown hair, and he moved uneasily in his chair.

"I don't follow you," he said. "What are you driving at? What do you mean?"

"What I say. But if you don't follow, well, you don't; and it's of no very great consequence. Perhaps we are both getting a little heavy in hand, out of our depth—stirring up superfluous sea-serpents in short. Let's agree to let the nasty beasts lie and drowse, in peace, on the floor of the four-mile-deep."

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Poppy smiled engagingly, and, still leaning forward, folded her delicate hands upon her bosom, looking Denier mirthfully in the eyes.

“Come along,” she said. “Amuse me. Bioscope the humours of the Westchurch election for me. I’m tremendously glad about the whole affair for your sake. I’m awfully keen to know.”

“The election? Oh! yes ——”

Denier leaned back in his chair, forcing his hands down into his trouser pockets. He was perplexed, nonplussed, and still singularly nervous. And he hated to be perplexed and nonplussed. It was not at all in his programme. He had never seen Poppy in this mood before. He would have liked to say she was talking nonsense, so disposing of his own perplexity. But he knew it was not her habit to talk nonsense. He had, indeed, a great reverence for her intelligence, finding in her utterances, as a rule, much support and encouragement. He had come here to-night of set purpose, with the resolute intention of securing a permanent

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monopoly of that support and encouragement. Hence his perplexity; for she seemed to trip him at every turn, outwit his purpose, frustrate his intention. If another leading question would have met the difficulty, he would not have scrupled to ask it. But no such question formulated itself. This gadfly mood of hers seemed hopeless to reason with. He felt the stab, yet could hardly locate it. Raising his hand to arrest her, she was gone.

“The election?” he repeated, with visible effort. “The humours of it were not conspicuously original. They bore a strong family likeness to those of every other contested election I ever saw — not calculated to increase one’s respect for the brains, or probity, or nobility of one’s fellow-man. All the human refuse comes to the top on such occasions, and acquires a market value which strikes one as slightly disgusting — if one has time to stand aside and think. Fortunately one has not time till afterwards, or the irony of one’s position might be stultifying. Bribery and corruption are non-

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existent, of course, in these blessed latter days. We all have clean hands and spotless consciences. Only the individual votes of the human refuse remain as indispensable as ever. One is bound to have them; and the price of them is satisfaction of the inherent lust of liquor and lust of punching heads. That price, of necessity, we continue to pay, if not directly yet indirectly, simply adding the ugliness of hypocrisy to the honest, naked, and unashamed ugliness of the pre-Reform Bill period. Human nature being what it is, I suppose all this is inevitable; but the results of it are singularly unattractive when you see them outside a dozen polling booths in the course of the same day. Viewed from that level the suffrage certainly presents the most amazing basis, ever conceived by the mind of man, upon which to raise a superstructure of world-wide empire."

Denier had continued to speak with effort. His election, the hard work, the many excitements and activities of it, seemed to him, just now, curiously far away. The

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present moment, and the riddle of it, held him wholly ; so that, while he spoke, his eyes travelled in growing fierceness of longing over Poppy's half-averted face, her red-lipped faintly mocking mouth and drooping eyelids, her finely modelled hands and arms, and her shoulders, so oddly hunched up under their costly covering of jewelled lace as though hardening themselves against the outrage of an impending blow. She created an atmosphere that was highly agitating. He could not pretend to understand her ; and, while it stimulated his desire of conquest, it angered him not to understand.

Of his perplexed and ardent scrutiny Poppy, on her part, was fully aware. Increasingly, exceedingly, it troubled her ; since something buried in the four-mile-deep of her own nature, something she dreaded and repudiated, awakened under that scrutiny, and reared its head responsive, claiming restitution of long-denied rights.

Directly Denier crossed the threshold of the restaurant, she had become aware of the first shudderings of that same awakening.

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It had filled her with fear—not of Denier, strong, masterful being though he was, but of herself. With all the force that was in her she tried to beat down those hungry denizens of her own private four-mile-deep, bade the darkness cover and the floods lie on them heavy as lead. But as the minutes passed they grew more lively, more daring, more coercive, whispering words of sweetly provoking import which she strove vainly not to hear. Why this dash on Denier's part to see her? What did it portend? What did he want? And what, still more, was she prepared to give? Had her assurances to Hammond been only an empty boast? Would friendship satisfy Denier? Would friendship, at that rate, satisfy her herself? She did not know; but this much she did know—that it was altogether dangerous to sit thus and wait and think. She made a gallant rally to break the spell, to become normal, to laugh and patter as was her wont; but her words seemed strained to her, her voice false.

“Come, come, you take it uncommonly

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hard, this glorious victory of yours, Denny dear," she said. "In some cases it is folly to go behind face values; but in others it's just as foolish not to go behind them, and a trifle cowardly into the bargain. Personally I've very small patience with the over-nice people who, picking a lily, shriek at the idea of the—saving your presence—dung-hill out of which its roots are fed. I am all for giving a civil good-day to the poor old dunghill, and rejoicing that it can, at a push, be put to such pretty uses as lily-growing."

She smiled at him, her expression one of very charming and indulgent protest.

"This mourning over beery voters—who, poor brutes, as you yourself own, are only behaving after the manner of their kind—is a very different story to that which you told Antony Hammond. Why this change of front? Don't shift your standpoint too often, dear old boy, and let the potential crank get ahead of the practical man of the world in you. It's a mistake—the rock on which, if you don't look out, you'll

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always be liable to split. You contradict yourself."

"No, I don't," he answered. "I can be as thorough-going an opportunist as any man when I choose. But though I mean to have what I mean to have, and to do what I mean to do, there is a reflective element in my mind as well. I can't blink facts, though it may suit me to kick them aside. And so I can't pretend to regard the ignorant and coarsely manipulated vote of the proletariat as a sound and logical basis for imperial government; though I am profoundly grateful to it in the present case, since it has helped me towards that which I meant to have."

Denier drew himself up, and looked away across the room to the glass doors opening on to the soft gloom of the verandah. It struck Poppy that his face was very fine just then — resolute, dignified, and with the severity upon it of conscious achievement.

"Yes," he said, "I have reason to be grateful. I have been drifting for years, uncertain of myself, uncertain of my own

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powers. Now I am classed. I have made people listen, made them acknowledge me. I have a definite goal ahead."

"I know," Poppy put in gently. "I know, dear boy, and I am immensely glad."

But Denier made no direct response. For the moment he was thinking wholly and solely of himself.

"Of course I might have stood sooner, and stood for a safer seat," he went on. "But that was not my plan. I wanted a fight which would bring my name and my personality into prominence immediately. I did not choose to hang upon the skirts of the party, but to be right on to its back, so to speak, at once. And that is exactly what I have done. Our party is perfectly well aware that it is anæmic, that it needs new blood; and, under that head, this West-church election shows that I am a very valuable recruit. In plain English, I have not only proved myself, but put the party under a very heavy obligation to me by winning the seat. They are bound to acknowledge

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the obligation in some practical form when they come into power. I am not going to take things easy and let them forget that little fact. I have taken not only my own measure, but the measure of my political colleagues and my political opponents in the last three or four weeks. I know what I am worth. If they don't know, I will teach them."

Denier laughed quietly and rather savagely.

"Both parties will find it does not pay to ignore me, I fancy," he said, "now that I have something actual and tangible to my record at last."

He paused, and started as one whose thought comes back from a far distance. Then, with a sort of blind rush, he turned to Poppy St. John, leaning across the corner of the little table, his expression agitated once more and nervous, his hot blue eyes — which both pleaded and commanded — searching hers, while carefully, yet with a violence of hardly repressed emotion, his fingers closed upon her wrist.

"And that's why I am here," he went on,

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speaking rapidly. "Don't you see? I have been waiting, waiting, ever since we first met nearly three years ago. I could not come to you empty-handed because, though I have a fair amount one way and another to offer any ordinary woman, I suppose, you — being among the greater lights of your own profession, with a definite name and place of your own — come into quite another category. It was too heavy a responsibility to ask you to give up the stage for my sake. Neither my own self-respect nor my respect for your genius permitted my doing that. But now that I am fairly in the saddle I am no longer afraid. You care for affairs, you have a *flair* for politics and diplomacy; and so I have some equivalent for your profession to offer you, in addition to just my — Don't edge away! Why should you? — You must see well enough, must have seen all along, how it was with me. What's the matter, darling? What have I done? What have I said?"

For Poppy had wrenched her wrist free and jumped up. Just now the finest and

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best of her, and the unlovely creature within her of the four-mile-deep, were at deadly strife. The upshot of the conflict she could not yet forecast; but to sit still and play with the situation any longer, under the garish restaurant lights, became intolerable to her.

“Do you reckon with what your words imply, Denny?” she broke out. “You’re not talking at random? If so, stop right away, at once. I’ll forget it — tell myself you were a little off your balance, tell myself you were a little drunk. You have time to unsay them honourably yet, as far as I am concerned — time to turn back.”

“But, Great Heavens!” he answered, his face working with excitement, “there is nothing” — he waited for a second — “no, nothing to unsay. I want to go on, not to go back. Marry me, marry me — can I put it more coarsely plainly than that? All I have, all I am, all I ever may be — well — my dear, it is yours.” He rose and spread out his hands — “Yours if you think the

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bargain is good enough—if you want me, if you care, if you like——”

There was a pause during which Poppy stood, her head raised, gazing at him with unfathomable eyes. Then she said, very softly:—“God bless you, Denny! You know how to love”—and her voice broke.

She turned away.

“Let me be for half an hour, dear old boy,” she went on huskily. “This is unexpected. It is complicated. I must have time to think.”

CHAPTER V

DIRECTLY below the glass-roofed verandah, running along the southern front of the hotel, the hill-side has been levelled into tennis and croquet lawns. At either end of the rectangular platform thus made, rise terraced shrubberies thickly planted with *escalonia*, *arbutus*, dwarf juniper and bay. In front it is bounded and supported by a rampart of masonry, forming, as seen from the lawns, a low broad-capped stone wall. In the centre, a paved space — flanked by square piers, each surmounted by a stone ball — opens upon a descending flight of stone steps leading to the rough pathway which meanders, through the warren and coppice of the chine, down to the shore. This abrupt transition, from formal carefully cultivated garden to the wild, possesses a singular significance and charm.

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Poppy St. John's intention, as she turned away from the dinner-table, had been to seek refuge in her own sitting-room, and there take stock of the position; but, half way along the restaurant, the whisper of the wind and sound of the sea saluted her, and she hesitated. Her sitting-room was not lonely enough. Little mascots of sorts — it was her habit to carry about with her — would remind; photographs would suggest and interrogate; the manuscript of Hammond's play would solicit and protest. And for the coming half-hour she required complete freedom, immunity from all adventitious bias. Only so could she look the position squarely in the face; only so could she be fair to Lucius Denier, fair also to herself. For she was called upon to determine, and that with briefest opportunity for meditation, whether the great chance or the great temptation of her life was presented to her. Clearly the sitting-room would not do — was, indeed, dangerous, alike from its bald commonplace, and the touches of intimate personal history with which she had striven to mitigate that

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same baldness. So, with a slightly daring gesture, she whipped the train of her tea-gown over her left arm—thus revealing a froth of white silk and lace petticoat frills, and a pair of pink paste-buckled high-heeled shoes—stepped with her accustomed unhurried demeanour out on to the verandah; and, her head carried high, careless of yet challenging remark, passed down on to the lawn, through the chequer of light streaming out from open door and window, to the soft clair-obscuré beyond. There, close against the boundary wall, the night met her with its disquieting fortifying influences, and took her spirit in its strong impersonal grasp.

At first she was insensible to those influences, the tides of long-resisted passion surging high in her, her emotions tumultuous, her mind working feverishly, purposelessly, as a racing screw. Neither Poppy's temperament nor her retrospect was, it must be admitted, much calculated to make for the judicial attitude. A girlhood of theatrical vagabondage; an unhappy childless marriage;

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some years of living more gay than virtuous or wise; an ideal friendship, which had altered all the values, ennobling her outlook, cleansing her soul; a rapid and brilliant professional success, placing her among the undisputed stars of the English and American stage. And now, suddenly—just on the verge of the cruel and perilous decade, moreover, when a woman's desire of life is at its hottest, her gifts at their ripest, her personality most realised and distinct, yet when youth is past and beauty entering upon the long hateful experience of diminution and decay—a lover, in the pride of his intellect and his manhood, of sufficient fortune, well-born, honourable, ardent, and, as it seemed in respect of a fine political career, with the ball at his feet!—Small wonder if Poppy could not immediately weigh, judge, appraise or discriminate; but, with profound triumph, simply feel!

“Ah! it is good to be loved, to be loved, to be loved!” she cried, half-aloud, exultantly. “Whatever the end of the story, it is good to be loved; to know your own power and

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the worth of your womanhood, and to play the great game once again."

In her exaltation, standing in the space at the head of the descending steps, a graceful pale-glistening figure, looking seaward, Poppy spread her arms wide, as though calling all heaven and earth to witness her act of worship and record her hymn of praise. Heaven and earth were not unheedful. In due time they made reply; but a reply enigmatic as that of some oracle of old.

The night was clear and moonless. The profound black-purple sky, set with ranks of innumerable stars, melted into the black-purple sea. The horizon line was indistinguishable; so that the extent of the sea could only be measured by its greater opacity, and by the fact that it was crossed, now and again, horizontally, by the lights of passing ships, red and green to port and starboard and, at the masthead, white. In the midst of this black-purple immensity, the wooded chine, shaped like the bowl of a long narrow spoon tapering downward, appeared to hang suspended. Eastward,

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the steep side of it blocked the view, wholly shutting out Compton Regis and the adjacent range of coast. Only a diffused brightness, thrown upward from the little town, was perceptible, against which the ragged bents and spare-grass on the crest of the hill stood out in sharp relief. Westward, the ground being more broken, the beach and chalk cliffs following the curve of the bay showed in pallid perspective. Wavering lines of glowworm-green phosphorescence marked the breaking of a wave. In the trough of the gully the pine and oak scrub was massed dense, indefinite, shadow upon shadow; save where, at intervals, the path disclosed itself in dim whiteness like the track of a gigantic snail.

At first the beauty and strangeness of the effects surrounding her went to heighten Poppy's exaltation; the artist in her apprehending and welcoming that strange beauty, thorough-paced daughter of great cities, cockney and stage-bred though she was. Slowly, in a sort of ecstasy, her whole being penetrated by sensuous emotion, she

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moved on down the flight of steps, and lingered there, leaning against the terminal stone pier.

“What a setting for a great love scene!”

She turned sideways, instinctively glancing up and back, half hoping that Lucius Denier, disregarding her request, might have followed her, and that so that love scene might take place here and at once.

Between the terraced banks of evergreens, above the low wall and level lawn, the façade of the hotel closed the valley. The lower stories of it and the silver-shimmering glass verandah, alive with lights and moving figures, looked unsubstantial as some paint and canvas transparency upon the stage. But the upper part of the building grew into weight and solidity; till the steep roofs, and wrought-iron *gerbes* and scroll-work adorning the ridges of them, cut harshly black into the luminous vault of star-spattered sky. What a setting for a love scene indeed, the values of it enhanced by glaring divergencies of suggestion and sentiment!—Yes, she wished Denier would come. But he would

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not — she knew that. He would obey her to the very letter. The man who had sufficient determination to wait for years, till he reckoned the hour propitious for speech, was certainly equal to waiting half an hour or so for his answer. His patience was of the essence of his masterfulness. Inversely his masterfulness was of the essence of his patience. Only those who are dead-sure of their own strength can afford to wait. Realising this, it slightly alarmed her; for in trying conclusions with Lucius Denier she was, clearly, trying them with a somewhat tremendous person. Therefore she had best bring herself into line, and that speedily; best seriously set herself to do that which she had demanded time to do — namely, know her own mind, dispassionately analyse her attitude towards the astonishing surprise he had sprung upon her. Poppy frowned, pressing her lips together resolutely and stared seaward again into the mysterious void, striving earnestly after definite and consecutive thought.

For in good truth, as she told herself, it

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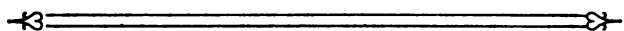
amounted to nothing less than this : — was she in love with Lucius Denier, or in love with love merely, or, more dubious still, in love mainly with the advantages and opportunities so excellent a marriage would procure her? Something of all three, she believed. By an act of will she now banished the ecstasy, and brought the almost cynical honesty of a woman uncommonly well versed in the ways both of ordinary humanity and of this troublesome world to bear upon the question. Poppy had been guilty of some regrettable aberrations in respect of the affections, yet there had all along been an element of unescapable rectitude in her. Doing evil, she had never juggled with her own moral sense, and, to stifle her conscience and justify her indiscretions, called evil good. Not for one moment, then, did she now deny that ambition stirred in her, or that the prospect of a solid social standing and the privileges which belong to it weighed with her. Such things have a very real and practical value which it is silly to under-rate. She thought of smart women who had

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cajoled and flattered her, seeking, in the name of thrice-sacred charity, to exploit her talents for purposes of self-advertisement. Thought of other women, less smart perhaps but not one scrap less self-seeking, who, having little to plume themselves upon save their own appreciation of their own — usually quite unassaulted — virtue, drew aside their skirts, with a mighty rustling, to avoid the pollution of her touch. Immortal powers! how she loathed the whole hypocritical lean-hearted lot! What sport to meet them on equal terms at last, pitting her brains, her wit, her beauty — for she had beauty still, no fear about that — against theirs! Would n't she just pay insolence with insolence, slights with slights, turn them verdigris-green with jealousy, individually and collectively make them skip. Whereupon Poppy shook her shoulders and snapped her pretty fingers, prospectively at the inward vision of these feminine offenders, though immediately, as it might seem, at the immortal stars.

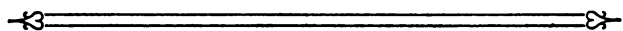
And then the repose and security of such a marriage, of a settled income, a settled

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and dignified home, of a man to care for and fight for you—and that Denny would fight like the fiend, if occasion arose, she entertained no smallest doubt. Just now it looked to her as though life, under such circumstances, would be one long holiday. No more grind of work, whether you were inclined for it or not. No more suspense as to the verdict upon plays, the success of which meant fortune or ruin to you, but meant to those who so callously condemned them no more than a ten-and-sixpenny stall—not that, even, since the critics are on the free list. No more fears, sickening disintegrating fears, that your day was declining, your methods stale; that other and younger artists were more in touch with the fashion of the times and consequently more acceptable than yourself.—She recalled, with a nervous shudder, the names of ex-members of her profession whom she made it her duty liberally to assist; sorryenough specimens, vain, envious, showy, abject, parasitic, for ever skulking up and down the by-ways of the theatrical world in pursuit of imaginary engagements,

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and too often, meanwhile, vilifying the private character and decrying the talents of those through whose mercy they were clothed and fed.—Therefore, as it seemed to her, to be out of it all, quit of it all, while your laurels were still green and your praise in every man's mouth, was not this a consummation devoutly to be wished, a brilliant exit, happy climax to a brilliant career? Poppy paused, letting her fancy play round the details of that same exit, picturing the enthusiasm of the great good-hearted public expending itself in extravagances of affectionate farewell.

“Oh! the unholy row they'd make, bless them!” she said. “And they'd weep, to the tune of a fire-hose in full blast. And I should cry big tears too—buckets, whole London-Water-Companies-main-reservoirs brim-full! There'd be flowers enough to shame a record royal funeral. And it would all be delightfully foolish and frantic and dear, and generally upsetting. I should feel as if I was attending my own lying-in-state, and a beast and a traitor for deserting them

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at the same time. Yet I should enjoy myself—oh! just should n't I?—down to the tips of my fingers and the ends of my toes."

She smiled, leaning her delicately clad shoulder against the gritty unyielding surface of the stone pier; her pale trailing draperies gathered up loosely in one hand, her mirthful, mournful eyes gazing out into the clear dark.

"And then afterwards," she went on—"afterwards Denny—persistent, extraordinary, and but partially discovered Denny. Unmitigated—yes, it's wisest to face it—unmitigated Denny, with his immense convictions, immense capacity of love, and equally immense—looking in his face, can one doubt it?—power of hate! A man big enough to frighten you. A man big enough to be worth running, though. And it would take a woman jolly well all her time to do that."

She put up both hands, restlessly pushing back the soft masses of hair from her forehead.

"Oh! it's a mighty lively gamble, Denny

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and all which he stands for," she said. "A simply staggering gamble and no mistake."

And thereupon she paused. For heaven and earth, whose witness she had invoked, began to reply to her invocation; or rather, perhaps, their reply, oracular and somewhat ironic, began at last to penetrate her understanding. From exaltation, mainly sensuous, she had journeyed, by the exercise of her own will, to very mundane common-sense. Now, the fortifying yet disquieting influences of the night, taking more sensible possession of her, carried her yet further. For, out in the open, even in close proximity to the most modern habitations of mankind, the night retains its ancient inherent solemnity. Up-to-date hotels, though under German-Swiss management, furnished with ample motor-garage and the last word of scientific bathing apparatus in the basement, fail to put it to the blush, or lessen, in any appreciable degree, its sublimity. Out in the open, the night is awful still, strangely indomitable, humiliating in its unfathomable majesty to whoso is not altogether convention-blinded

OUT IN THE OPEN

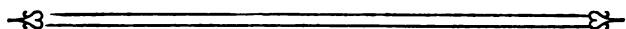
and destitute of the very rudiments of spiritual insight. For by it the Present, and the countless feverish activities of the Present, are hopelessly cheapened, rendered ludicrous almost in their glaring inadequacy, as against the stupendous range of an illimitable Past and illimitable Future. Out in the open the night speaks, speaks persistently, of the beginnings and the end of things visible — carries apprehension behind and beyond these even to the verge of the unsoundable abyss of self-existent being. Voices from the Unknown call in the night wind, in the long-drawn sibilant hush of the sea, in the breathing of the dew-softened earth. Still more do they call from out the blank black-purple spaces between the shining archipelagoes of stars.

Faintly and confusedly, but with compelling authority, those voices became audible to Poppy St. John. They were startling, pregnant of much very foreign to her ordinary manner of life and thought. She listened unwillingly, striving to interpret their message; not because it was pleasant

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to her to do so, but simply because she must, because they refused to be gainsaid. At first the message sounded as one of desolation, proclaiming the vanity of all human endeavour, the folly of all ambition, the pitiful evanescence of love. Against this jeremiad the healthy gutter-sparrow pagan in her rebelled dashingly. She turned reckless. Every labourer is worthy of his hire. If there is no reward for goodness, why the devil take any trouble to be good? If desolation is the last word of all true seeing, then indeed let us make the grossly best of a grossly bad job; eat to gluttony, drink to drunkenness, since to-morrow we so miserably and contemptibly die. Be shot if she would n't take Lucius Denier, and the many pleasant things a marriage with him obviously stood for, at their face value, without further scruple, or discussion, or effort after a nice appreciation of her own mental and emotional standpoint! A fig for the risks! A fig, too, for contingent obligations and duties! If eventually the marriage turned out badly—well, for her

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part she washed her hands of the consequences. She at least would have had her run for her money; and, when the day of reckoning came, could trust herself — had n't she done it on certain memorable former occasions? — to pay up like a man.

But this braggart humour did not last very long with her. For, happily, when a nature, having really fine elements in it, has once had those elements brought fully and fruitfully into play, it thereby creates for itself standards to which — short of some catastrophe of moral collapse — it cannot long refuse to conform. And though Poppy might, in this moment of reaction and wounded self-esteem, fling defiance at the eternities, she was agreeably far away from all catastrophe of moral collapse. The ideal friendship which had developed the nobler qualities of her nature had weight with her still, prompting her in each crisis that arose to refuse the evil and choose the good. Through it she had become, so to speak, the prisoner of her own best hours, her own years of pure living, her own charities, her

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own whole-hearted devotion to perfection—in as far as she could see and reach it—in the practice of her art. To have admitted this, even to herself, would have seemed to her a trifle showy. Her action was un-studied, instinctive, and not without tenderly humorous protests towards the memory of the beloved friend who had done so much, not by admonition but simply by the exquisiteness of his own personality, to make and keep her fine. And so it followed that, after her present little kick over the traces, she speedily settled down again, continuing to listen to those voices from the Unknown, continuing to strive after interpretation of their message. Such glorious beauty as that spread out before her could not tell of desolation alone. It was n't in reason. Thinking back over the richest and sweetest of her experience, she refused to believe the message could be a message of despair. Her ear was but poorly attuned to such mystic speech, more likely. She must go half-way to meet it, then—yield a little, simplify herself a little, be gently passive,

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thereby inviting the charm to work. And that it should work, guiding her to clear conclusions, had become imperative to her.

Only to secure the necessary conditions of such working, it appeared to her she must be even more completely isolated, safe a while longer from any raiding on the part of her waiting lover. She must, in plain English, give Denny the slip until such time as it pleased the oracle to deliver itself fully. In furtherance of all which — a spice of malice perhaps lending an edge to her very real seriousness of purpose — she proceeded to step down on to the dim whiteness of the pathway, and follow its meanderings through the dusky coppice for some fifteen or twenty yards. There the path formed an elbow, upon a little level grassy opening beside which a stone seat had been posted, crescent-shaped, and screened from observation landward by a grove of stunted pines.

It was not without a measure of inward trepidation that Poppy made her way to

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this secluded spot. The town-bred and the country-bred are put about by very different matters. To Poppy, for instance, the Strand at this hour, the trample and roar of the traffic, raucous-voiced newsboys crying "extra specials," the glare of the street lamps and shop fronts, the pavements blackened by a surging crowd, the thick heavy smells vomited forth by eating-houses and restaurants, the whole roofed in by an impenetrable canopy of London smoke and fog, would have offered nothing disconcerting. She would have negotiated the resounding thoroughfare on foot, if necessary, without a tremor. But this was quite another affair. As far as she could remember she had never been out, thus, alone, at night-time, in the wild. The strange transparent darkness — darkness which yet is light — the inequalities of the ground under her daintily shod feet, small detached noises, as of unseen beastlings scurrying through the undergrowth, startled and alarmed her. She felt as though furtively watched, followed, spied upon by beings half-human, possibly mischievous

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and malign. Moist scents, of a singularly harsh freshness, arising from the earth, mingled with the aromatic odour of the pine-trees. The rounded trunks of these last, sloping landward with the slope of the hill-side, yet no two at precisely the same angle, took on the semblance of a company of monster snakes reared fearsomely up on end. The wind, drawing up the steep gully from the beach, sighed in the topmost branches, tossing their tufted crests—stiff aigrettes of long, straight pine needles, through the shifting interspaces of which the lights of the hotel flickered sharply, only to be as sharply obscured. The effect was exciting, keeping attention on the stretch.

Poppy's breath came rather quick. Reaching the haven of the stone seat, she cowered down on it, and surveyed her surroundings in wide-eyed inquiry. She felt very homeless out here in the wilderness. Again, involuntarily, she asked herself whether desolation could after all be the last word? And again repudiated that answer, not gutter-sparrow pagan-wise, but from an altogether

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higher and more philosophical level than that of the gutter. For it would be grotesque, too unthinkably and horribly grotesque, in face both of the splendours and the sufferings of earthly existence. And, with that, her mind turned, in strong yearning, towards all which is sweet, tenderly nurtured and gentle in human intercourse and human relations. Lucius Denier, and all which marriage with him stood for, took on a new aspect seen at this angle under the enigmatic empire of Nature and of the night. Not gratification of passion—however legitimatised—not gratification of social ambition, not the desire for holiday after years of honest hard work, swayed her; but something at once simpler and nobler than these. Shrinking, with a sacred shyness, from the meaning of her own thought, Poppy looked deeper into her heart; and there, from the innermost chamber of it, her wasted motherhood looked back at her, praying for satisfaction and release.

Greatly moved, she drew herself up, her face stern, an amazement of recognition hold-

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ing her. Could it be that here she touched the determining factor? Well, thank God, then marriage did not come too late. She was not past child-bearing; but sound and vigorous, in such excellence of health as to the most scrupulous might justify motherhood. And at that, the suiting of action to thought being instinctive to her, with a sob in her throat she gathered her arms against her breast as though a baby lay in them, and bent her head in yearning tenderness as though to kiss its face.

For a sensible space of time the illusion and the joy of it remained. She felt her child warm against her bosom, while a rapture of unselfish love, at once voluptuous and austere, sustained her. But such fine delights are inevitably but brief. Slowly, as one awed, having forced the door of some Holy of Holies and wrested its secret, Poppy raised herself and sat upright. Her arms fell straight at her sides, her hands resting palms downward, outspread on the chill surface of the stone bench, her mind feeling out in wordless interrogation and acceptance.

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Had she indeed reached the Absolute? Was this the veritable last word of the meaning of her life, of every woman's life — namely, motherhood — missing which she misses the very intention and the glory of her existence as woman? That thought, as she contemplated it, carried very far. And here, out in the open, it assumed its true relation, true significance; all ribaldry, false niceness — with which the over-civilised try to cloak accepted nastiness — falling away from it, and leaving it in its essential beauty, essential sanity, as part of the divine universal plan. Daringly her intelligence followed on to seize the idea in its fullness, fascinated by the great vistas, natural and spiritual, which opened before her thought. For the time Poppy was forgetful of all else.

How long she remained thus absorbed she could not have said. She had never before so consciously made use of the best of her brain-power. The sensation was exhilarating; for no conscious exercise of power ministers more splendidly to personal pride than the conscious exercise of brain-power.

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She was at length recalled from regions abstract and intellectual, by a strange and somewhat eerie appeal to sight and hearing. Across the opaque black-purple outstretch of the sea-floor, in the vacancy of the mid-distance—appearing from behind the still more opaque blackness of the broken hill-side to westward—came a ship, the form of which was only perceptible by the lines of light marking the rounds of the portholes fore and aft, the square apertures of the saloon windows amidships, and outlining the under edge of the awnings on deck above. It moved evenly, stealthily, over the unseen dead-calm water, a ship painted in pale flame, leaving diverging stains of undulating pallor in its wake. And from it, borne on the fitful breath of the night wind, came a thin music of stringed instruments—violins and a harp—to which the muffled chunking of the engines, like some monster metronome, beat time. — Only a belated pleasure-steamer crowded with tired trippers, altogether, for their personal comfort, too leisurely making port. But this heightened rather than lessened

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the romance. The plaintive, sparkling dance music—the band was playing, as Poppy noted, a valse—cut her to the quick. Was it not symbolic of the endless small would-be-happy things of daily life? The perpetual promise of them to each generation in turn; the almost equally perpetual falling short and failure; a gay going forth at morning, a weary home-coming at night? The over-mastering pathos of pleasure stabbed Poppy; and the enormous courage it requires to see, and know, and admit, and yet keep going, seemed to her almost too heavy a drain on mind and heart. Her eyes grew wet, and the vision of the ship and its brightness blurred as she watched. For might it not stand for some twentieth-century Charon boat, steaming across a twentieth-century River Styx, with full cargo of light souls on board—frivolous thin-twittering beings, of the sort which reckons with appearances only, and for whom therefore comic opera airs afforded most appropriate requiem? When they reached the farther shore, and Charon, reversing his engines, grimly left them, would

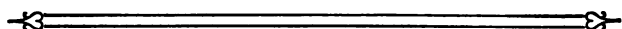
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they suffer, she wondered, a rude awakening, or merely continue to twitter — silly flitting ghosts — realising as little what it all meant there in eternity as they had here in time?

That idea of their reaching the other shore touched her as intimately personal to herself; as — she could not say why — big with impending fate. When their passage was accomplished, then something of great moment would occur, affecting all her future. She watched breathlessly, straining her eyes, while the wail of the violins and lilt of the valse still reached her, growing more attenuated second by second. Now the forward lights touched the blackness of the steeply sloping land to eastward. Steadily, relentlessly, it ate them up, one by one; ate up the following whiteness of the wake. And immediately, out of the all-encircling dimness, a call near at hand, a man's voice, harsh, imperative, and a sound of hastening footsteps.

Poppy stood erect, tall and tense, a shudder of excitement, which was also alarm, running right through her from head to heel. She

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saw clearly at last. The message had ceased to be enigmatic, but it remained ironical. Out in the open the night spoke truth without mercy.—Yes, the last word was motherhood. But a motherhood profound, far-reaching, vicarious, yet weighted with suffering, as she judged, sharper than any pains of childbed—very different to motherhood as she had so lately figured it in the dream of a babe at her breast.

And then, bulking big, a rough, strenuous, in a sense dangerous figure, through the massed shadows of the woodland, Lucius Denier came into sight.

CHAPTER VI

A H! so you are here! Well, I have allowed you a generous half hour.”
“I haven’t wasted it. I’m ready.”

“You speak as though you were going to execution.”

“So I am, most probably. Let’s hope I shall contrive, anyhow, to execute myself with a good grace.”

The man’s accents were hoarse and broken, like those of one breathless from running. The woman’s were grave, even sad. Standing opposite one another upon the circle of rough turf, their meeting was more suggestive of that of a pair of duellists than of a pair of lovers. Practically the whole scene was devoid of colour, a matter of fine values of greater or lesser dimness only. This tended to produce a sinister effect, though the night was mild and the beauty of it so notably great.

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The twisted overhanging branches and stiff tufted aigrettes of the pines, bitten into the indistinct background as with an etcher's tool, shifted and whispered in the upward sucking draught. The snake-like tree-trunks, although motionless, appeared to shrink away from the draught too, hugging the slope of the hill for protection. Denier glanced about him uneasily, as though suspicious of possible ambush.

"I do not half like your tone," he said. "And I don't half like this uncanny light. It's baffling. I wish I could see your face."

Poppy's declaration that she was ready had partaken somewhat of the nature of a boast. The coming fight—for that it had to be a fight, a fight to a finish, she was well assured—taxed all her wit and all her pluck. She did not in the least enjoy the prospect of that which lay ahead.

"I am afraid my face would help you precious little, dear old boy," she said. "You forget it's my fortune exactly in proportion as it doesn't tell tales out of school. It's trained to be a mask, tragic or comic

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to suit my purpose. I am an actress, remember; and I play my part—always I play my part.”

Denier looked hard at her, then swung away to the verge of the grass-plat, where the ground fell steeply in warren and coppice to the beach; and stood there, his back towards her, gazing out to sea. Poppy remained where she was, but some half-dozen paces distant, for the space was small. She measured the young man's figure thoughtfully, and in the haunting, whispering silence her heart beat in her ears. For it came home to her what an immensely powerful man, physically, he was. This unquestionably was attractive; but it was also alarming in a sense. Supposing, at any time, the idealist went under and the mere animal got the mastery! His adversary, his victim, would have an uncommonly poor chance. For a moment she came very near being downright scared at being out with him, thus, alone in the wild. Suddenly he spoke to her sullenly, harshly, over his shoulder.

“Am I to understand, then, that my offer

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in your opinion not being good enough, you propose trying on some cat-and-mouse game with me so as to avoid giving me a straight answer? But I mean to have a straight answer. I tell you, I am going to have it. I don't implore, or request, or apologise. I demand it as my right. Look here, is marriage with me good enough, or is it not?"

"The worry is that, in some ways, it's much too good."

He wheeled round and held out his arms.

"Then, darling — then?" he said.

But Poppy clasped her hands behind her back. Contact, at this juncture, might, she knew, be her undoing.

"Not so fast, Denny dear," she answered gently. "There's a whole lot, yet awhile, one way and another which must be said."

"For God's sake say it then, and get through with it."

He came back a step or two, put up one foot on the stone seat and bowed himself together, resting his right elbow on his knee and covering his eyes with his hand.

"Go on!" he said, "go on. Talk, tell

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me; only don't keep me dangling between heaven and hell longer than you can help. I love you, do you understand — I love you. I have had a certain amount to do with women, of course; but, except with you, I have never been in love. As long as I was silent, it was there all the while, and I took it out and looked at it twenty times a day; but it was peaceable. It did not hurt. Now that I have gone as far as telling you, it has become torment until I know what the result is to be. But be under no misapprehension. I have waited — but I have watched very warily too; and if I had seen signs which made me judge it wiser to do so I should have spoken sooner. I have held myself ready to speak at any moment rather than run the least chance of losing you — though it would have displeased me to speak sooner. As I told you at dinner, I was determined not to come to you — if I could possibly avoid doing so — until I had proved both to myself and to others that I was a little out of the common ruck, and that I could offer you participation in what looks like a big future."

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He stopped abruptly.

"Yes, a big future," he repeated with emphasis. "When that point was secure, I did not loose an hour. Do you see? That is my position. Now talk if you like."

"Oh! yes, I see fast enough," Poppy rejoined — "see, and am grateful; but precisely on that account it is rather difficult to talk."

Denier raised his head.

"All right, don't talk, then — accept. That is, if you care enough."

Poppy swayed a little from the waist, her hands still clasped behind her. She was profoundly touched; and her pride — native pride, pride bred too of such devotion on his part — recoiled fiercely from the dragging of certain skeletons out of the decent seclusion of their cupboards. Only it had in honour, as she at least conceived honour, to be done.

"But that's just where it comes in, Denny," she said. "It would be plain sailing if I did n't care; but I do care, care enough to fight desperately shy of letting

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you risk your capital of married happiness by investing it in damaged goods."

Denier braced himself, trying not to alter his attitude by so much as a hair's breadth; but the blow went home, and he winced. And, notwithstanding the dim light, Poppy — hawk-eyed — saw that he winced. That he should do so was, she recognised, inevitable; nevertheless it pained her shrewdly. The base sinner may escape. The nobler sinner pays the price of his or her sinning to the uttermost farthing; and who dares say, this side of death, when payment of that particular farthing is reached? It took Denier a few seconds to recover himself.

"Ah! there, you see," Poppy cried bitterly. She could not contain herself. The pain was too sharp.

The young man straightened himself up.

"Doesn't the fact that I am here prove, beyond all question, that in my estimation the goods are not damaged?" he asked.

Then he bowed himself together again, covering his eyes with his hand. Poppy watched him in silence. She too required a little space in which to regain her composure.

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“In your estimation, bless your dear foolishness, yes” — she said, at last. “But — in the opinion of Society at large?”

“Society at large be damned!”

“No, no — not at least under that head. For once Society is in the right. It refuses to compound a certain sort of felony — that felony being admitted — except in a very few cases; and it ought to refuse to do so.”

Denier made an impatient gesture with his left hand.

“You know as well as I do Society is rotten at the core.”

“All the more reason for keeping the rind cleanly,” she answered bravely; “so that the innocent may have a chance of a wholesome mouthful at the start. It’s all very well, but I own I’ve a soft spot in my heart for the Young Person, so long as she is not exalted into a court of final appeal in questions of literature or of art. That’s frank idiocy — the very silliest inversion of the parts. Otherwise, poor little girls, I’m sorry for them. Once upon a time, rather horribly

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long ago, way back in the fairy-tale days, you see, I was a young person myself, so I know how it all feels."

Poppy paused, and turning looked across the valley to where, outlined against the vague brightness cast up by the lights of the hidden town, the bents and spare grass fringing the crest of the hill shivered in the night wind. Just then her faith failed somewhat; while a profound and angry pity for the tragedy of womanhood as exemplified in her personal experience, and the experience of millions of other women, surged up in her.

"It feels worse than any man will ever quite understand, I think. Oh! we learn what human nature — yours and our own — is really made of quite early enough; and if we are ordinarily good, modest little girls that's bound to give us a nasty shock. Society is an iniquitous old humbug, has been so in the main through the whole course of history — granted. All the more reason, then, that she should do her level best to drive poor *débutante* babies in blinkers as long as she jolly well can! It saves both them and her.

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The last thing a humbug covets, after all, is to be found out."

Poppy spoke low; but her voice was vibrant, stinging in its suppressed passion. Her hearer could hardly bear it, the sense of her words working upon his emotions, the tones of her voice upon his senses. He moved, came and stood beside her.

"All that may be true," he said, speaking slowly and carefully. "Still, are you not losing yourself and talking rather wide of the mark? Under existing circumstances, I own, I am but moderately interested in disquisitions, however eloquent, upon the best method for the preservation of the innocence of the infant female sex. Suppose you apply your burning charity a little nearer home."

He put out his left hand and laid it upon her shoulder.

"Poppy"—he went on, "you are not usually stupid, nor are you wantonly cruel. Very well, then, get it into your head that I am in love, if ever man was." His hand grew heavy, pressing the jewels of her em-

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broidered jacket into her flesh. "In love — hopelessly, irrevocably in love, and for the first time. Think of all that means to me! I have waited a long while."

She stood rigidly still for a moment; then took a deep sobbing breath and bent her head sideways so that her cheek touched the back of his hand.

"When you're gentle you become perilously near being irresistible, Denny," she said.

Denier laughed between his closed teeth.

"So do you, my dear," he returned, "very perilously."

But thereupon, quick as a cat, Poppy slipped from under his hand and drew away from him. He let her go without protest, though he looked at her strangely through the all-encompassing dusk. Then sullenly, resentfully, he resumed his old position — right foot planted on the stone seat, his body bowed together, his eyes covered by his hand.

"Go on — talk," he said, "only for pity's sake keep to the point if you can."

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“ Ah ! dear old boy,” Poppy cried : “ what a beastly hard row you ’re giving me to hoe ! ”

“ Pardon me, you give it to yourself. I disclaim all responsibility. You must put up with the consequences of your own inordinate lust of superfluous conversation. Deuce knows they ’re trying enough to me ! But there, go on — talk, since you will have it so. I am resigned, quiescent again. Talk away.”

Words and tone alike nettled her so that she had much ado to restrain her tongue. She was rough on him, perhaps ; but was she not far more rough on herself, arguing thus against her own worldly interests and purely, as she saw it, in favour of his ? Eventually he might have his way ; but he should only have it open-eyed, the stumbling blocks and rocks of offence encumbering that way revealed to him by the strongest search-lights which her rectitude and her wit could turn on to them. At least he should never be able to say he had not had fair warning. Of the purity of her purpose Poppy was bitterly certain ; the more so that, as she looked at this rough, sullen, powerful figure,

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opaquely dark against the surrounding transparent darkness, she recognised how very little she wanted to alienate Denier, to lose him, to give him up. She clasped her hands over her heart. Was she in love, after all these years — again in love — with the man himself, and for himself, even as the proverbial Young Person might be? Her own position just now struck her as rather cruelly pathetic. She had to allow herself a breathing space before joining battle again — while she listened to the sighing pines overhead and the sound of the sea below. This last had altered in character and import. The tide was far out, the waves breaking at irregular intervals with a hollow drumming upon a ledge of sunken rock. Between that sound and her own speech she perceived a certain analogy. For did not her words beat thus upon sunken rocks of moral and social law, which only wait to tear the bottom out of any craft unlucky enough to ground on them? Oh! it was weary work, yet she was in honour bound to go forward with it.

“Heaven knows I don’t want to torment

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you, Denny," she began, "but, you see, your whole future is at stake to make or to mar. You don't consider that."

"I do," he put in, and his voice was a trifle unsteady. "I have considered it, or I should not be here."

Something in his tone started Poppy—chilled her too just the least bit. Was he slightly uncertain of the wisdom of his own action after all? Well, that rubbed the bloom off the business perhaps; but it made no difference to her duty. She ignored the interruption.

"You look exclusively at the one thing," she went on. "Don't doubt that I love to have you do so. It's about the most superb compliment you can pay me—and I relish compliments. But just on that account I mustn't let myself be blinded by the dazzle of the sweetness of them. It would be an everlasting shame to me if—at my age—I did n't think for both of us, and think ahead. You in your generous one-idea'd recklessness say d— Society, forgetting that Society, at one level or another, is at once the raw

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material and the master of your career. Don't squirm, bless you. It just is. It can break you by the simple expedient of refusing you its support — to put it coarsely, its votes. So you offend its susceptibilities at a tremendous risk. And the social susceptibilities, in other words, prejudices, of a country town like Westchurch bristle as thick as spines on a hedgehog. The sour puritan leaven works mightily in it still, making people—specially multifarious old women of both sexes—nose around perpetually in the pious hope of unearthing a scandal. Quite right from their virtuous-citizen point of view; but mighty inconvenient for some of us, at close quarters, nevertheless. Oh! I tell you I know something of the minds and consciences of that middle-class and small shopkeeper lot, from touring the provinces with theatrical companies in old days. Even in the case of us accepted vagabonds they are sniffy enough; but in the case of their precious Member—my stars! if any one of his relations can't show an immaculate record, up and down the scale to the third and fourth generation,

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his seat becomes an uncommonly wobbly affair, I promise you. And then—and then——”

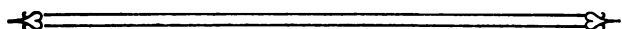
Poppy spread out her hands, the effect of her as that of some splendid fragrant hot-house flower in the mysterious claire-obscure of the open and of the night.

“Then me—me, *mon cher*. Think of it. Me, an exotic—an altogether too prepossessing, and unexplained and unexplainable lady! Older than you by several years, too, the number of which very certainly won't suffer diminution in the mouths of ill-wishers.—But is it necessary to enlarge upon this agreeable topic?”

For once more Denier had raised his head. He watched her, stung not only by her beauty and the drama of her voice, but by the merciless common-sense to which that voice gave utterance. Once more he winced, and she noted it. Once more he hesitated, at a loss for an immediate reply.

“Ah! I thought so,” she cried. “You know as well as I do, if you'll sink sentiment——”

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"Sentiment?" he remonstrated. "Have you no better name for it than that?"

"Yes, sentiment," she declared bravely. "A bond fragile as glass when it stands between a man and the fulfilment of his ambitions." Her tone softened. "I'm not accusing you of caprice. I don't mean that sentiment would peter out this week or next, Denny. I have too high an opinion of my own charms, let alone your constancy, for that. I am speaking of five, ten, fifteen years hence, when you have found yourself, and when your marriage has become an old story. Well, sinking sentiment, then, you must see — must have seen all along and debated the pros and cons of it, I feel pretty sure, since though you are an idealist you're no blind beetle — that marriage with me, though you love me and me only, young as you are and with your great prospects and ability, means a handicap — an all-round handicap, and a beastly heavy one at that."

As she ceased speaking Poppy sank down upon the stone bench, and sat there huddled

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together, her face thin, her eyes cavernous, all the fire gone out of her.

Denier glanced at her in sharp inquiry. She would not faint. He felt she was not the kind of woman to play that very tedious trick upon either adversary or lover. And he had discovered that he, in his turn, needed space for reflection, time in which to reckon with his own attitude, his own innermost thought. Stiffly, for his long boots began to cramp him, he moved away to the extreme verge of the grass plat again. His uppermost feeling was one of resentment. She was so terribly acute, reading him more clearly than he had ever cared to read himself. And her reasoning was just, as were the conclusions she drew from it. He had unquestionably been aware of disadvantages attendant upon such a marriage, but he had refused to permit himself to dwell upon them. He was naturally combative. He was also very much in love. But now, she having put the case against the said marriage with such uncompromising lucidity, every hour of doubt, every secret fear which

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had ever assailed him, came back and stared him almost vulgarly in the face. He was not grateful to her. He wished to goodness she had left all that in the vague. But she had spared him nothing. How she had kept his nose to the grindstone during the last hour!

No, decidedly he was not grateful to her. His masculine self-esteem was outraged. If he was prepared to ignore disabilities, surely she might ignore them likewise! Neither did he relish her freedom of speech, with its implication of equality. In even the most modern and devoted of men the sultan dies hard, when it comes to a personal conflict between masculine prerogative and feminine recognition of that prerogative. So it happened that Poppy's late rending of accepted veils offended his taste. He was tired and spent, moreover, with weeks of unceasing effort and suspense, culminating in the sustained excitement of the last twenty-four hours. He had rushed off, in a white heat of ardour, to lay all his triumph at her feet; and he had met with so perplexing, so questionable a reception. A

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revulsion of feeling followed in inevitable sequence. Notwithstanding his natural arrogance and vigour, he felt, just now, quite childishly ill-used and hurt.

And yet he loved her. Denier came back to that with a sort of rage against her, against himself. Truly no other woman had ever made any serious impression upon his life. No woman ever would, in the future, he believed, did he part with her. It was Poppy St. John or nothing in respect of love and marriage. Failing her he swept the whole question of domesticity and the affections aside, and would give himself exclusively to his political work.

Poet and man of action, chivalrous lover and fighter for prizes quite other than woman's love, sensuous and intellectual appetite held fierce debate in Lucius Denier just now. He forced his clenched fists down into his pockets, standing with his feet planted well apart—as though on the deck of a rolling ship—while the veins swelled on his high narrow forehead, and his hot blue eyes raked the darkness. Which should he do—

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take the woman he loved and the chances of humiliation, of deferred fruition, conceivably of rank failure in things to him of supreme importance which, alas! went along with her? Or, dropping the woman, sacrificing the solace and delight of her, playing too but a somewhat scurvy part by her, thereby ensure perfect freedom to devote every energy to the development of a great position and a distinguished name? Constituted as he was, this presented a frightful problem, and one containing elements eminently repulsive to his mind and heart. For it was a problem not of choice between good and evil action; but of choice between two lines of action, mutually destructive, though each, in its own way, fine and right. Inclination pushed him with equal force in either direction. Duty pushed him equally in either direction likewise. Denier was desperately hard pressed.

And all the while, gaining force from the now flowing tide, the unseen waves, with sinister insistence, made a hollow drumming upon the ledge of sunken rock.

CHAPTER VII

IT was a maxim of Antony Hammond's that heroic conduct and cold baths, though alike of inestimable value in theory, should, in practice, be indulged in with a wise economy; since, in both cases, the immediate glow of righteous self-congratulation induced by them is followed by a prolonged chill of deep-seated discouragement. He would cite the above in illustration of his pet theory as to the perpetual working of a beneficent Providence towards the adjustment of mental and emotional balance. All moods—so called—however apparently contradictory or extravagant, he declared to be, scientifically considered, an unconscious effort on the part of the human system to return to a normal condition; barring which effort, he confidently affirmed, that only congenital idiots are likely to avoid the disagreeable probability of dying stark, staring mad.

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And that these views found a measure of confirmation in Poppy St. John's present experience may be asserted. After exaltation collapse, after the finely romantic the slightly abject attitude, after a great spreading of wings a most commonplace crawling—the bow of Achilles altogether unstrung, in short. Thus it came about that presently she stretched herself, leaned back and crossed her pretty feet, the rims of the heels of her pink shoes resting on the rough greensward, the toes of them erect in air. Yawned generously, laying her arms along the top of the back of the curved bench, her hands hanging languidly downward from the turn of the wrist. Fetched a weariful sigh, agreeing with herself that, except upon the stage and vicariously, she had reached a phase of development when situations were abhorrent to her. Gazed vacantly at the tufts of long pine-needles cutting into the stupendous vault of the night sky, and indolently contrasted stars with spangles to the disadvantage of the former. Shivered a little in the moist keen-scented freshness, longing

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to be snugly tucked up in bed, with a volume of Lavedan, or Richepin, or Anatole France for company. Glanced out of the corners of her eyes unwillingly at Denier's dark figure, wondering whether it would not have made mightily for the peace and comfort of all concerned if he had remained in conclave with the Westchurch city fathers, instead of skirmishing across three counties in pursuit of that which publishers' advertisements describe as "a strong love interest." Thought indulgently of Antony Hammond and of the incidental advantages to yourself and others of a tepid temperament and frivolous outlook. Wished with her whole heart, honestly, ironically, that the question of marriage had never been broached, since it had so inconveniently stirred up dormant monsters of her private four-mile-deep, and caused her, in her efforts to control them, such exceedingly exhausting mental and moral gymnastics. Yawned again, shutting her eyes and yearning that, when she opened them, she might find the present well past and herself planted safely, plump, in the middle of

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next week. Finally passed into a state of gentle coma, only to come to herself again, with a sharp cry and start, as a presence huge, dominating, urgent, ate up the air and blocked space immediately in front of her.

"I am afraid you're very tired," Denier said, looking down at her, his manner curiously forced, almost apologetic.

"Confoundedly," she answered. "Dished, my good boy. Not a kick left in me."

"Then—then—give way. What more obvious or reasonable?"

He still spoke in that oddly forced manner, and loudly—as though his voice was under insufficient control. In her present somewhat ribald humour this irritated Poppy. She gazed at him reflectively. For just now he presented himself under a new aspect. It did not attract her; she questioned indeed whether it did not amount to being slightly ridiculous. As has already been stated, Denier was considerably above the average both in height and bulk. At this moment Poppy had a queer fancy that he tried to magnify his already extensive proportions, to

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show taller, larger, more dominating than he actually was — and that, less with a purpose of creating an impression upon her mind than upon his own. This, the gutter-sparrow being in the ascendant, provoked her. It was on the tip of her tongue to beg him not to inflate himself any more lest frog-like he should perchance incontinently burst, when he spoke again.

“Give in,” he repeated. “Don’t let us contend any more. I shall have my own way in the end.”

“Hum! hum! hum!” Poppy murmured naughtily, between tightly closed lips.

“Yes, I shall,” he repeated. “So you may just as well resign yourself and leave the future to me first as last. I am quite big enough to deal with it. Do I look like a weakling?”

Which most emphatically she agreed he did not.

“Admitting,” he continued, “that some of the difficulties you have so unsparingly catalogued may exist, do you suppose that I am such a chicken-livered animal as to be headed off by them? If this marriage

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should prove a handicap—the expression is yours, not mine, remember—that would only add to the zest of winning one's race."

The young man's voice softened. His manner became more natural.

"The heavier the odds against me, the better in some respects I should be pleased. Surely you can understand that, loving you as I do—for I do love you——"

"Yes, yes," Poppy put in. "I believe that."

"Well, then, any meeting with stupidity and prejudice where you are concerned, annihilating them and vindicating you, would be in the highest degree stimulating to me—a thank-offering, for the delight of having you, which I should make with every fibre of manhood in me."

The last sentence rang out with a fine assurance, Denier's former ardour returning, his own words dissipating his doubts and giving the lie to his halting convictions. But as Poppy did not answer, merely continuing to contemplate him through the baffling dimness, he decided to permit him-

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self a more direct method both of self-encouragement and of appeal. He sat down beside her and skilfully, daringly, put his arm round her waist and drew her close against him. Poppy did not change her attitude. Her arms remained outspread along the top of the back of the bench, her feet remained crossed. But she half opened her mouth viciously and her eyes blazed. Denier had never attempted anything in the shape of a caress before. She would indeed have cried hands off, and made uncommonly short work of him had he done so. But here, out in the open, things looked different. Audacities, losing their flavour of scandal somehow, became singularly natural amid these primitive surroundings. She was discouraged, weary in well-doing. The gutter-sparrow is a rascally little fowl, moreover, with a native relish for doubtfully correct proceedings. Therefore, without further protest, she yielded to the charm of the position. She did not move, but the lines of her beautiful body became languid and pliant, the weight of it delicately positive

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upon the young man's supporting arm. The sense of his great strength was very soothing; but soothing as a drug may be soothing, with that hint of underlying excitement which supplies the tonic craved. For some minutes she remained thus, silent, still, quiescent, hypnotised by the man's youth, by the commanding force of his personality, moved almost to tears by the fiction of safety and repose which his virility and his unlooked-for gentleness generated in her. Should she give way, agree to marry him regardless of possible disaster, leaving the future and all the brunt of it to be borne by him? All—and how very much that all was, from her standpoint!—which could be said in favour of this marriage came back to her. Why be righteous above that which is written? The ways of love are very pleasant. Why, out of a perhaps exaggerated sense of honour, refuse to walk in them? Why scruple? Why dig below the fair surface? Why?—for even the most valiant of women, the most gifted and the proudest, finds it heavy work always to stand alone.

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Poppy leaned her head right back, her upturned face and the curve of her throat curiously wan in the colourless dusk, and closed her eyes with a long-drawn sigh.

“Ah! Denny, Denny,” she murmured; “it’s very sweet, but I’m afraid it’s very foolish—this Hampstead Heath, Southend-on-Sea, bank holiday sort of business in which you and I are indulging just now.”

And once again Denier winced. He was keyed up almost to breaking-point, between hunger of the heart, determined self-control, and that maddening difficulty of final choice. Why could n’t she have said something else? Why this persistent perversity of speech, this defect of taste, just when it offended most? She might have helped him, might have made the risks seem lighter, might have made love all-compelling; but she hindered rather than helped. In the future would she be liable to do just this—fail in tact, fail in taste, when, as his wife, such failure might spell disaster to his ambitions? Would this beautiful and noble creature—for that she was noble, nobler than he

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himself was, he acknowledged — whose close proximity set his blood on fire, prove to him in the end nothing less than ruin? For a few seconds Denier suffered as acutely as it is given to man to suffer. Then he ranged himself, steadying his nerves, steadying his temper by an immense exercise of will; and, taking up her words turned them, not without praiseworthy chivalry, to her advantage.

“Probably the Hampstead Heath methods are as good as any others, darling,” he said. “They have the sanction of hoary antiquity, in any case. From the dawn of human history man and woman must have sat, as we now sit, in the clear night under the stars, hearing the song of the surf and the wind and the woodland; and have felt, with a lovely and terrible yearning, that whatever the years might bring them of fame, and wealth, and power, this — this lingering in the forecourt of the temple of love, this sacred preface to the consummated drama of the beloved and the lover — is still the most exquisite, the most divinely perfect flower of human existence.”

“ So the preface is the best of the book, Denny ? ” she said half bitterly, half sadly. “ Then obviously it is the part of the wise to rest content with the preface and read no further.”

Poppy did not stir, yet the languor went out of her. Her body stiffened, the seductive weight of it no longer bearing sensibly upon the young man's outstretched arm.

The inflowing tide had covered the ledge of sunken rock. The hollow drumming of the

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waves had ceased. They broke now with a trampling roar and grate upon beds of shingle, each a little nearer, each a little more distinct in sound than the last. There was a slight ground sea; and, from behind it, a breeze rushed up the gully, sharp with the smell of the salt and the seaweed, making the coppice bow to right and left as though stricken by panic and the pines toss their branches aloft in swift tumult. It affected Poppy profoundly; so that for a moment she cowered down beside Denier, shuddering, seeking shelter from the chill blast of it as from the passing of some supernatural presence, of some elemental spirit competent alike to give life or to slay. Yet while it terrified it also braced her, since in the rush of it she heard, not Denier's muttered and angry repudiation of her accusation, but the call, clear though merciless, of those voices from out the Unknown, the purport of whose message she had earlier so earnestly striven both to interpret and to deny. Suddenly and mysteriously as it had come, the breeze died away over the vale-head. Poppy raised

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herself again ; and thereupon the gutter-sparrow fluttered off to perch far distant. She had indeed small use for the bird and its impudence at this juncture. With a superb courage she rallied all her virtue, all her seriousness, invoking the help of the departed friend who, when living, had done so much to strengthen her against self-indulgence, self-seeking, license, and light-likes.

"I am cramped, dear old boy," she said, gravely and quietly to Denier, turning her head and looking him full in the face. "I think we have had enough of this. It only leads to the edge of a certain precipice down which it would be contemptible for you and me, swine-like, to fall headlong at this time of day. Let me go."

But for all answer Denier stared back at her with savage, bloodshot eyes, his countenance strangely disfigured ; while, spreading his hand wide over her heart, his grip tightened until she felt her ribs must crack and splinter under the strain. She turned sick from the suffocating anguish, and her

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sight grew blurred. It came to her how many hundred times upon the stage she had played at death, before an audience moved to tears by her counterfeit presentment. Now she felt death incarnate play with her, iron-handed, threatening to crush her out of earthly existence as wantonly as she herself might crush some fragile airy-dancing gnat. Still she would die game, if die she must. Throwing all the sarcasm of which it was capable into her voice, she cried defiantly: —

“I’m not your wife after all, remember, Denny—so you’ve no cause, no right to kill me—yet. To kill me won’t help you one little bit.”

For the moment the taunt merely fed the madness of Denier’s passion. While his left hand still crushed her heart, his right leapt out and spanned the round of her throat. All attempt at struggle against such strength was futile, ludicrous. Poppy resigned herself, and that without flinching. But she was thankful her vision had become too clouded for her any longer to see his face, since she

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divined it to be hideous as that of some huge rufous predatory beast, ranging, blood-hungry, through the dimness of the wild. She had known man's love under most fair and gracious aspects, and did not covet, therefore, to leave this world with such a picture of it as that stamped on her retina. Then, just as consciousness was ebbing wholly, Denier's grasp relaxed, his hand ceased to throttle, his arm dropped away from her; and Poppy's life, turning, began slowly, blindly to stagger back up the awful terror-ridden track whose terminus is dissolution.

Denier had flung away to the far end of the stone bench. He sat there bowed double, his shoulders heaving convulsively, his feet planted wide apart, his face in his hands right down between his knees.

"Damn it all—damn it all!" he raged hoarsely. "Go on—what next? So I am afraid, am I—I am afraid?"

But Poppy made no answer. That return journey was too full as yet of amazement and of pain. She was racked in spirit, racked in body, bruised and aching. While, as her

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sight cleared and steadied, it was wonderful to find the stars still shining calm and radiant in their places ; and greater wonder to see the glitter of the hotel lights between the shifting foliage of the adjacent trees. All the customary landmarks were there unaltered ; the sounds, the scents, the same. This reassured her. For, in good truth, she was very glad to come back. Her thought went out in affectionate longing towards London, towards the theatre, towards the kindly playgoing public, of whom—as it seemed—in the last endless few minutes she had come so near taking an endless farewell. She stretched herself a little, tentatively, carefully, a catch in her breath. Oh! she was glad, very glad, to come back. And this was all just now which occupied her—a conscious restitution, a reaching out after the normal interests and habits of her life ; bewilderment, desperation, terror falling quietly away from her ; she emerging, shaken it is true, sensible of escape from appalling danger, but increasingly mistress of herself, her personality essentially intact.

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With Denier, at this stage of her revival, she in no wise concerned herself. He was—and herein her native force of character became evident—passed over, missed out. So that, when his voice at last reached her, it appeared to do so from some remote distance.

“Poppy!” he cried, imperatively, “answer me. Have I been a brute? Have I hurt you?”

“Yes,” she said. “You have been a brute. You have hurt me.” Then she added, picking up the whole question at issue between herself and him once again with remarkable lucidity and detachment:—
“And you are afraid—afraid not only for yourself, but for others. And you have reason to be afraid.”

“For whom? For you?”

“Oh, yes, for me, perhaps. But chiefly for your own people.”

She spoke in brief sentences. The pain lessened. She sat upright, her hand pressed down on the hard surface of the seat on either side of her. She was not angry with

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Denier. She felt a great pity for him, a great desire to be fair towards him.

"You may accept the handicap," she went on. "Your people won't, and they ought not to."

"I am perfectly competent to deal with the members of my own family," Denier returned.

"Doubtless—but I have my share of pride too. And I do not find it either becoming or complimentary, in this particular connection, that they should need any dealing with."

"My mother is avowedly anxious that I should marry," he said, in a sullen dead-level tone. "My father, as you know, died when I was a boy. My brothers will be careful to avoid expressing any opinion. My sisters' opinion will not be asked. I am my own master. I do what is right in my own sight. My relations learned long ago that I do not permit interference in my private affairs."

"Ah! be careful," Poppy broke in, her spirit rising. "You prove too much, making

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it unflatteringly evident that though in my own world I am very much master — don't I practically hold author, manager, company, the whole personnel of the theatre, down to the very call-boy, between my finger and thumb? — in your world I shall be barely tolerated. From top-dog I shall turn pie-dog, in short — and why, I ask you — ”

But Denier interrupted her harshly, raising himself, turning towards her. His expression was singular. She seemed to detect in it the strangest mingling of shame, fierceness, and of relief.

“ There, now we touch bottom at last,” he said. “ Here is the real crux — not a handicap, real or imaginary, for me; but the loss of prestige for you. Why beat about the bush any more? Be honest, and have done with it. Admit the truth — namely, that my offer is not good enough.”

As Poppy listened, detachment fled — the tears started hot and scalding into her eyes. She shrugged her shoulders with a hopeless movement.

“ Ah! Denny, Denny, Denny — you fool,

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and worse than fool ! Will no man ever be just to a woman ? ” she said.

Denier stared at her morosely.

“ I don't understand,” he blurted out.

“ But I do, dear old boy,” she answered quite gently, “ understand down to the very ground.”

The young man rose to his feet, heavily, wearily, and walked to the edge of the grass plat. It seemed to Poppy a long time that he stood there, looking seaward into the transparent black-purple void. At last he wheeled round, came and knelt down in front of her, putting both arms round her loins, and laying his head in her lap.

“ Poppy,” he said, “ I love you. You know the worst of me now. You've seen the devil let loose in me. But that too was, at bottom, just love. I love you — do you hear ? I shall never love any one else. Once more, darling, yes or no — I love you — will you marry me ? Before God, if you do you shall never have cause to repent.”

And Poppy took his face in both her

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hands, raised it, bent down and kissed him on the mouth.

“No, Denny, dear,” she said, “I won’t marry you — not that I’m afraid of the devil in you, don’t fancy that. But it would n’t work, dear old boy. I wish it would; but for neither of us would it work. We artist people are made to love and be loved, but not to marry. We cannot conform for long together, can’t obey orders and stay in line. Our art is the biggest thing in our lives after all. It makes us capricious, uncertain, driving us perpetually to do and say the thing we had best not. Plato was jolly well right, all those centuries ago, when, in the interests of social peace and quietness, he turned the poets out of his ideal republic. Even if we artist people mean to live good — well, we’ve a deuced rough time of it ourselves, and give other people a rough time too.”

Poppy paused for a brief space. She was unspeakably tired. Her heart fluttered. Her bruised ribs ached.

“I love you,” she went on at last, slowly. “Never loved you so well, brute though

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you have been to me, than now. So do as I bid you, dear, for I know best. Be good. Clear out of this. Go back to West-church, back to your work. Make a great name for yourself—you can if you choose. I shall not be indifferent or unobservant. I shall count your every step up the ladder of fame; and shall be awfully proud of you, wholly glad as I see you rise a head and shoulders above your fellows. For it comes to this, Denny, if I know myself, I love you too much, far too much, in any way to queer your pitch. — And now look here, dear old boy, let Turquand drive the car. You're not fit to. You're a lot too jumpy and worked up. I shall stay till you're gone, here, out in the open, to quiet down and cast up my accounts with the past and the future. God keep you, Denny. Have no remorse. — Now march, please — just get up and march."

Then Denier played his last card. It was a dirty one and he knew that, still he played it deliberately, — the idealist, the latent satyr, the fighting man in him refusing to

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acknowledge defeat, and all combining to push him the same way. He still knelt in front of her, holding her.

“But why need this be the end?” he asked. “You say you love me, and I have waited very long. Is n’t there another solution? Is nothing short of marriage possible as between you and me?”

“Ah!” Poppy cried out loud, “you might have spared me that!”

But the outcry was momentary. Almost immediately she recovered herself, accepting to the full the stern discipline enjoined upon her by that recent revelation of vicarious motherhood. She spoke gravely yet tenderly, and without faintest inflection of resentment.

“No, my dear, short of marriage there is nothing — nothing between us, since, in our folly, we have broken friendship’s unwritten laws. Nothing short of marriage is possible between us, and never shall be; though, for your sake far more than for my own, marriage I cannot and will not have.”

With that she gently loosened his arms from around her.

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"It is over. All good be with you, Denny. Don't disappoint me. Take the world by storm. Make a great name," she said.

And knowing that he had got his straight answer at last, without look or comment Lucius Denier rose and swung away, a savage, masterful, and, in a sense, fateful figure through the gloom of the coppice into the heart of the calmly indomitable night.

CHAPTER VIII

IT may be noted in passing that Antony Hammond's bedroom, at the Chine Hotel, was situated on the second floor at the back of the house. During the small hours of the ensuing morning, his virtuous slumbers were vexatiously intruded upon by the sound of the racing engines of a stationary motor-car, drawn up under the glass *marquise* of the main entrance just below. At first he contented himself by mildly cursing the unknown owner of this destroyer of nocturnal peace. But, as fuller recollection of recent events came to him, he arose — modestly arrayed in a suit of striped pink and maize-coloured pyjamas — and, pulling up the Venetian blind covering the widely open window, peered out. He was just in time to see the car — the dark body of it apparently travelling suspended between the

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paleness of the chalky road and the yellowish glare of its own headlights — breast the hill on to the open down, with a long-drawn vicious snarl and speed inland, while the volleying grey dust raised by it mingled along the horizon with the grey of the dawn which, eastward, began to annihilate the solemn splendours of the starlit sky.

“Ah! I comprehend. Exit the strenuous young man,” Hammond said to himself. “But, my eye! what a law-breaking pace the fellow drives at! Furious as that of Jehu the son of Nimshi — another example, by the way, of inconvenient political and moral strenuosity, though in an earlier connection. Rather you than me, anyhow, my volcanic young friend, on board that death-distributing, space-devouring projectile!”

Then as the galloping discordant-voiced vehicle faded into the far perspective, and repose settled down upon the bare landscape again, Hammond added complacently: —

“Judging by appearances, whatever the true rendering of his interview with our one and only Poppy, it has not left him

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in the happiest of tempers. I can bear up under that, though. Fly away, Mr. Denier — against the loss of you I, for one, feel wonderfully supported!”

He lowered the blind again. Since, save to the young, legitimate possessors of unlimited hope, the Goddess of the Dawn is liable, somehow, to prove but doubtfully encouraging company, Hammond did not care to hold prolonged intercourse with her. He sought his couch once more; but sleep, though he wooed it assiduously, proved coy, not by any means to be had simply for the asking. The surprising happenings of the past twelve hours, in as far as he personally had witnessed them, marshalled themselves before him with bewildering ambiguity of suggestion. What did they actually mean; and in what had the drama culminated? He admitted he had n't the ghost of a notion, and that it was palpably silly to pretend that he had.

Poppy St. John did not appear at ten-o'clock breakfast. Of this abstention, however, Hammond made small account. The

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amateur and the idler alone have time to rise early. Show me the man or woman who gets up five minutes before he or she is absolutely obliged to, and I will show you the matutinal prig and postprandial bore, or worse—that at least was Hammond's opinion. But, as the morning ripened to midday, his impatience to see and hear, to be told, or still better deftly to discover, became rampant—though rampant, it may be added, less after the similitude of the proverbial roaring lion than of a round and comely grass-fed lamb. The most disastrous possibilities began to present themselves to his imagination. What, for instance, if a quite other construction could be put upon the young man's breakneck driving? Was it just barely conceivable that the one and only Poppy had gone off bodily, in that hurtling automobile, along with so eminently modern an edition of the Young Lochinvar as Lucius Denier? As luncheon-time approached, curiosity and suspense alike becoming too acute for endurance, he assured himself that the commonest courtesy de-

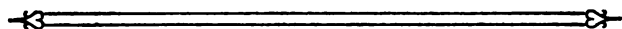
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manded that he should no longer delay to prosecute inquiries regarding the fair lady's welfare and whereabouts; or to place his diurnal tribute of affectionate, if half-bantering, compliment at her charming feet.

But, since messages too often prove as unsatisfactory to the sender as they are irritating to the receiver of them, Hammond decided to be his own courier; and therewith made his leisurely way, along the soft-carpeted corridors, to Poppy's bay-windowed, seaward-facing sitting-room upon the first floor. The door of it stood wide open. Confusion, suggestive of a hasty flitting, reigned within. Details of highly decorative feminine attire, insufficiently veiled by reams of outspread white tissue-paper, encumbered the furniture; as did yawning hat-boxes and dress-baskets the floor. Amid which, high priestess of the sacred rites implied by them, Poppy's long-time-devoted maid, middle-aged, lean, active yet slightly flushed by her present exertions, with a severely busy face moved to and fro.

"Good-morning, my dear Mrs. Philli-

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more," Hammond cried genially. "It is always a happiness to have the chance of a word with you. But what, in the name of wonder, do these extensive preparations portend?"

Hammond prided himself on the excellence of his relations with servants, counting this good woman as amongst the most affable of his domestic acquaintance. To-day, however, her manner was repressive, that of a person by no means to be trifled with or taken in vain.

"You are not aware that we go back to town this afternoon, sir?" she inquired, with a sarcastic inflection.

"Indeed, I am aware of nothing of the kind," Hammond declared. "And I am extremely sorry to be made aware of it. But why? Nothing wrong, I trust? Miss St. John is not ill?"

"Madam has not given me her reasons for leaving, sir," Phillimore snapped, fixing poor Hammond with a suspicious and resentful eye. Which, as he reflected, really was a little too bad; since, whoever might be

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responsible for the existing state of affairs, he quite conspicuously and ingloriously was n't.

"I am sorry," he repeated soothingly. "Where, if I may venture to inquire, is Miss St. John now?"

"I am sure I can't say, sir. I sent her out of doors with the little dog. She was fagged enough without troubling about the baggage. Too, I always do my packing quickest by myself."

At which broad hint that his presence was superfluous, Hammond judged it best to retire without further attempt at either cajolery or enlightenment.

Sunk in thought—for had not the whole business become more entangled than ever?—yet with underlying hope of encountering the fugitive fair one, he sauntered downstairs and into the garden. The radiance of the morning had been gradually obscured by a veil of insweeping sea-fog, which swathed the coast-line, gathering fold on fold in each gully and lap of the downs. The wooded chine was obliterated by it; while, on the lawns, the figures of the

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tennis-players showed undeterminate and fantastic, as they shouted and capered wildly in pursuit of semi-invisible balls. Hammond turned away, their anticking striking him as tiresome and slightly vulgar, and ascended the rustic steps leading through the terraced shrubberies to the confines of the hotel grounds. Here he struck the coast-guard path and followed it for some twenty or thirty paces, then stopped, the atmospheric effects proving singular to a point approaching dismay. Inland, he felt convinced, the day remained clear, and the sun still shone broadly; but immediately around him the fog, climbing the cliff edge, drifted past in contorted, tormented shapes, torn and trailing, clammy to the touch, and infected by a dank charnel-house smell. It was as though the graveyard of the sea had indeed given up its dead. And all the while, at quick intervals, the hoarse bellowing of the fog-horn of a big steamer, anxiously feeling her way up Channel, seemed to betoken impending addition to that unnumbered multitude of castaways.

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At moments the fog would lift or part, disclosing islands of green flower-decked turf, or spaces of azure-smiling heaven ; but only to close in and down again, chill and thick as before. The whole was perturbing, charged with a melancholy against which Hammond's easy-going optimistic philosophy was not altogether proof. Under the pressure of it, his attitude towards the subject of his thought, and object of his search, altered in character from curiosity to active solicitude. It shocked him, as at once grotesque and tragic, to suppose Poppy St. John, queen of the footlights, spoiled child of civilisation, wondering lonely amid these blinding malodorous vapours upon the treeless down.

Once or twice he fancied that, away to the left, he heard a cry and the whimpering of a dog ; but the sounds — if they existed — were speedily lost again, as the bellowsings of the steamer's fog-horn rent the heavy air. Hammond strained his eyes to see, his ears to listen. The thought of this particular woman, desolate and unsheltered,

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was to him as an outrage, a vandalism, against which not only all the chivalry of which he was capable, but all his reverence for art, revolted. He did not stay, in mildly cynical amusement, to register or analyse his own emotions ; but moved by the first impulse, so to speak, all of a piece. Presently, between the fog-horn's thunderous complainings, he again detected, or imagined he detected, a plaintive cry. It was a thousand to one that cry emanated from the person whose welfare lay so near his heart. Equally, it was a thousand to one he located the sound accurately, unpractised in outdoor matters as he was. Still, in his present humour, he was hot, even at the risk of making himself slightly ridiculous, to miss no chances. He struck sharply up the slippery grass slope, careless of appearances, calling Poppy St. John loudly by name as he pounded along. Then, perhaps as a mere coincidence, perhaps because faith does in very fact remove mountains — self-forgetting moral effort producing direct physical result — the mist parted, allowing a

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fleeting vision of a woman's figure some fifty yards ahead—grey and strangely spectral against the ragged background of wool-white fog.

The next thing Hammond knew was that his hand held Poppy St. John's elbow, earnestly propelling her forward, as though negotiating the traffic of some crowded city thoroughfare; while the toy spaniel she carried, craning its neck over her arm, gratefully caressed the tips of his fingers with a moist pink morsel of tongue.

"Go right on," he said. "Go on. Let us get to the top of the hill. There this stifling abomination off the face of the waters will leave us. We shall find the sunshine, and you will be safe."

Five minutes later, on the crown of the slope, the dry land wind met them, blowing gaily across miles of rolling country—golden with stubble fields, lavender with upland pasture, rose-russet with moorland, lush with green in the near valleys, blue-blotted with wood; villages and hamlets, strung like clusters of red and grey-brown berries along

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the intersecting thread of the great north-eastward-trending high road, on the verge of which they stood.

So far Poppy had been silent, yielding herself with a childlike dependence to the support of Hammond's guiding hand. Now, looking out over the smiling landscape, she spoke.

"I am going home," she said simply. "Going home to London." She paused, then added, somewhat brokenly—for this unlooked-for change in her companion to knight-errant, from somewhat paltry carpet-knight, touched her to the quick—"I have read that second act, Antony. You've made it uncommonly good. It's on all fours, now, from start to finish, not a halt in it. It gallops. This is the best thing you've ever done, the finest part you've ever written for me. I tell you, it will tax my resources. I shall have to rise to it. So I am going home to put the play into rehearsal at once."

"Oh! bless me," Hammond answered. He had taken off his hat, and stood mopping his forehead, with an wholly unaccustomed, tenderly whimsical expression of face. "I'd

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clean forgotten all about our infant Bombay. I am enchanted, of course, that, in his new coat and breeches, you are pleased with the brat. But you see, you see, the thought of you and those treacherous cliffs in the fog gave me the most detestable fright. It has added a good ten to the already far too respectable number of my years."

Hammond wiped his forehead again; and, under cover of that abandoned action, permitted himself to ask the leading question at last.

"You say you are going to put the play into rehearsal. From the chaste seclusion of my bed-chamber I witnessed a hasty and noisy exit, per motor-car, at an unholily early hour this morning. By these facts may I gather joyful assurance that you do not contemplate entering into the bonds of matrimony—weighty bonds in that case, I cannot but imagine—with our strenuous visitor of last evening?"

As he spoke Poppy moved a little aside, looking at him from out the shadow of her

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rose-garlanded hat. For the first time since their recent meeting, Hammond had leisure and opportunity to observe her appearance. It shocked him, with the conviction that something of cruel significance had happened to her. Her face was drawn, her skin sallow, her beautiful eyes dim and sunken, her eyelids swollen and red. He perceived that she had cried long and bitterly since he parted with her, in the glare of the restaurant lights, overnight. He further perceived that she had made no use of those delicate arts by which women—no longer in their first youth—strive to hide the ravages worked by the disaster of tears. This moved him deeply, seeming to him to imply very much.

“I am not going to marry any one,” she said. “Not Denny—not even you, *mon cher*—though you have comforted me, and helped, and reconciled me, more than you know. So have no anxieties or delusions under that head. ‘Unadulterated friendship’ is more than ever my motto, though you do scoff at it. Our little Bombay goes

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into rehearsal right away—all of which is proof positive that the cobbler sticks to his last.”

Then suddenly she clutched at Hammond’s arm.

“Oh! take me back, dear man,” she cried, her lips quivering. “Take me back, away from this horrible, overpowering, heartless, raw-boned Nature—back to the pavements and houses, the lamps and shops and the streets—back to the dear, dear people who suffer and curse, and laugh and love—for they are dear, all of them, whether they are good or bad. I hate this indecently naked land and sea, naked day and night, naked light and darkness, cloud and fog. It takes up too much room. It hulls one down and crowds one out. It began so horribly long before we were born or thought of. It will go on so horribly long after we’re dead and forgot. It makes me feel sick and believe in nothing—not even in those I have loved best, not even in myself, not even in Almighty God. I hate its passionless sterility, and passionless fecundity alike. It is the enemy of human life, the enemy of

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art. Yes, I hate it — I hate it. It wants to scare and kill. Think of the poor souls on board that steamer, and of the harrowing protest, as of some mammoth in agony, of that beastly fog-horn voicing their dread."

Poppy stopped abruptly, and set her teeth, while the little dog, scared by her tone, wriggled in her arms and whimpered. She put it down gently and watched it shake itself and sport away daintily over the short fragrant turf. Then she looked round at Hammond, with a pathetic effect of re-awakened pride and courage.

"It strikes me," she said, "my attitude becomes slightly maudlin. "Don't worry, though; but like a good dear, just stand by. I have been pretty nastily shaken up one way and another; but I shall be as right as a trivet as soon as I smell the grime and the cookshops, and see the countless ranks of soot-vomiting chimneys when the train slips into Waterloo station in this evening's dusk.

Poppy indulged in a finely dramatic wave of the hand.

"Talk about tropic forests, Alps and

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things — good heavens, give me the Vauxhall Bridge Road ! ”

Half laughing, half crying she turned to Hammond again.

“ Antony, I’m awfully fond of you,” she said. “ I don’t believe I shall ever have the heart to tease you any more. At a push you are really the very best of good sorts, you know.”

“ I am your most devoted slave, dear lady,” he answered, with a smiling gravity wholly pleasant and becoming. “ And, with your permission, I propose to remain so as long as I perambulate the highways and byways of this much abused, but really very passably engaging, world. — Now let me take you back to the hotel. You perceive that even down there in the Chine the abomination of fog grows less. We both of us, I think, after the violent exercises of the morning, deserve a comfortable luncheon. Fortified by which, and snapping our fingers at the greatly overrated beauties of Nature, we will set forth together upon our homeward urban pilgrimage — a

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pilgrimage joyfully and devoutly undertaken
in the interests of that thrice-blessed trinity
— Friendship, Humanity, and Art.”

“From Bombay to Bayswater,” it may be added, has scored a record success on both sides of the Atlantic. Poppy St. John is more the darling of the Anglo-American playgoing public, and Hammond is more her faithful brother in arms and admirer, than ever. Yet he candidly admits, in moments of depression, that the problem of his delightful ally’s past relation to Lucius Denier, and the mystery of that volcanic young politician’s distracting and distracted visit to the Chine Hotel, Compton Regis, still remains, in as far as he, Antony Hammond, personally is concerned, quite infuriatingly unsolved, and insoluble.

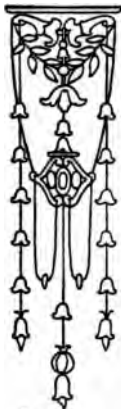
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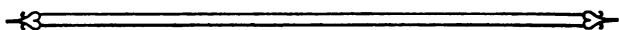
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CHAPTER I

IT happened thus, one May afternoon, in an ancient city, built of brown hewn stone upon foundations of living rock, through the frowning gateways of which show gracious perspectives of rainbow-tinted country backed by lofty snow-capped hills. A grim fourteenth-century building, half palace, half fortress, now used as a hospital, stands in one of the narrow side-streets running back from the Corso. The windows of the accident ward, which is situated on the first floor at the rear of the great house, overlook a small grass-grown piazza, planted with six pollarded acacia trees, upon a bastion of the city wall. Below the wall the hillside falls away sharply in terraced



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gardens, orchards, and vineyards, between which the broad dusty road winds down, in a succession of gigantic S.'s, to the staring constructions of the modern railway station about a mile and a half distant in the plain.

The walls of the ward had recently been whitewashed up to the spring of the vaulted ceiling. But here the iconoclastic hand of twentieth-century sanitation had happily been stayed, sparing the mellow frescoes. So that, from out a setting of elaborate arabesques in monochrome, richly coloured, buoyant with all the magnificent heartlessness of the classic idea, Ganymede and his god-eagle lover, Bacchus lighting down from his panther-drawn chariot, lolling pot-bellied Silenus amid lusty riot of wanton nymphs and goat-shanked satyrs, gazed in hard-eyed indifference upon the samples of tortured and mutilated latter-day humanity outstretched upon the narrow beds below.

Around the fourth bed, on the window side, the white-habited nursing sisters, at midday, had drawn a couple of high screens, thereby intimating to any whom so common

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occurrence might concern that its occupant lay in his death agony. And from behind the screens came the sound of two voices. — One that of an old man, calm, patient, indulgent, yet weighted with conscious authority. The other that of a young man, now feverish, bitter, eager in utterance, now sinking into halting whispers, now growing tender and even momentarily gay. The beds on either side the small enclosure were vacant. The nuns sat working quietly beside the clean-scrubbed deal table, with its carefully disposed load of cups, bottles, basins, and unlovely surgical appliances, in the centre of the ward. No one, therefore, was near enough to distinguish the words actually spoken. Nevertheless, the sound of those two voices, alternate, intermittent, yet, as it seemed, interminable, so permeated the whole clear well-lighted space with an effect of sustained suspense, of vague insidious alarm, that now and again the white-habited sisters silently recited a prayer and crossed themselves, while an ill-conditioned little Neapolitan conscript, in the bed in the

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far corner, first chanted a dirty music-hall catch respecting the ways of light women, and then, burying his wide-mouthed monkey-face in his pillow, cried himself abjectly to sleep.

“Through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault,” the young voice repeated hoarsely. — A pause followed, during which the jangle of mule bells and harsh cry of muleteers from the sun-scorched, upward-climbing high-road came in at the open windows, along with the singing of a girl among the vines below the city wall.

“My son, shall I question you, and will you answer? Or would it be easier to you to tell me in your own words?”

“I would rather tell you, Father, if you — if we both — have time.”

“My time is yours, my son, so speak at what length you please. Unburden yourself wholly. But strive to speak as calmly and concisely as you can, thus husbanding what remains to you of strength.”

“An hour sooner, an hour later, what does it signify since, in any case, I am to die?”

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“ Still, we should be cautious how we provoke Death to hasten, even when his coming is but a question of hours, lest in so doing we be found to work against the merciful purposes of Almighty God.”

“ But I have hastened Death already, and to some purpose. I am by nature fervid. I cannot sit still and wait. So, the grisly wretch being over slow in coming, I hurried him up with a soft-nosed rifle bullet. What other course was open to me, I ask you, lover of justice as I am, in this falsely humane country where we are too nice to execute our criminals, preferring to let them rot slowly, half-starved and half-naked, within the yard of some pest-infected prison fort, till they decline to a level of bestiality fit to make apes weep for very shame and put swine to the blush? I am a poet, a devotee of beauty, a lover of all lovely things. I could not face such degradation. To die, yes, it is justice — if not redress, at least expiation — since I had killed. But to rot? No, Father, I am young, well-born, a lover, as I tell you, of all lovely things. I refused to rot, to stink

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physically and spiritually in my own nostrils. — Pah! — Impossible! That is asking too much. So I was forced to take the law into my own hands, becoming judge, prisoner, executioner, all three, and all at once.”

“ God is judge, my son.”

“ Yes, yes ; and, when men fail one, He stands by to help one through. Therefore I thank Him for giving some good fellow wit enough to invent little soft-nosed rifle bullets with which, in defect of human justice, one can prick up laggard Death. But I was spent, Father, at once maddened and unnerved by the pursuing horror of fate ; and that made me clumsy, so that I failed to deal altogether successfully with grisly Master Death. And so they brought me here, in misplaced intention of kindness, at dawn, from my rooms at the hotel. And here I have lain ever since. My poor body is as dead. I can move neither hand nor foot ; but my brain is alive and awake. And the red blot is gone, Father — it is gone ; by which fact I am justified in my action — justified in my belief that by letting

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blood I should cease to see blood. The red blot is gone" — the young voice rose in exultant triumph — "it is gone. After months of torture I have emancipated myself. I am a poet once more, a clear-eyed worshipper of beauty. The red blot no longer stains the sunshine, or the dear face of nature ; or the face of a friend such as yours, Father — for you are my friend, are you not ? You are here precisely on that account, to bring me pardon and to strengthen me. You wish me well. You are here to speak words of consolation and of hope."

" I wish you well, my son, from my heart. But, before I employ the prerogative of pardon resident in me in virtue of my office, I must hear that which you have to tell actually and substantially, not vaguely and in part. Complete your confession then, my poor child, without reserve. Keep nothing from me."

" Yes — I will tell you all, absolutely all. Why, indeed, should I attempt to do otherwise ? I have been silent for so long,

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and so desolate in my silence — cut off by it from all natural well-being of human intercourse — that to speak is like the setting free of mountain streams in springtime, held by the chill paralysis of winter frost. — But wait, Father, listen a little minute to that woman's voice. — A pure soprano, untrained but full and sweet — singing, bird-like, of love and of the pains of love. I too, Father ——— ”

“ Softly, my son, softly. Time presses, and you wander from the point.”

“ So I do. — But the immeasurable joy of living has got me again, practically dead man though I am, now that I no longer see the accursed red blot. — It was shaped like the head of a lynx, Father, with a square muzzle and tufted prick-ears — alert, watchful, infinitely malicious. — I die, Father — die; and it is no joke, I promise you, to die young, open-eyed, conscious of all that which you lose, that which you're leaving. — Yet in the very act of dying I am sensible that I have regained my birthright. I am in touch once more with all the mystic

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loveliness of life. Forgive me then if I just pause to kiss my hand to my recovered treasure in passing. I do so in the spirit of thanksgiving not of licence, as a brief praising of God for the immeasurable beauty of the world which it pleased Him, in the beginning, to make. — And so sing on, dear unknown woman, below the city wall — sing on of life and love and the sweet pains of loving, in strange enchanting contrast to this checking of the black inventory of my sins.”

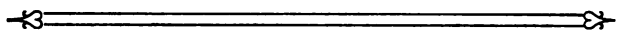
The tones of the voice changed, losing their exultant quality, becoming concentrated, positive.

“To make things plain I must go back many years.”

“Do so then, my son.”

“You know how impressionable a child’s mind is, Father; and how, a particular idea once planted in it, that idea, by skilful and reiterated allusion, can be made to dominate its whole outlook? The idea, thus nourished, is always rooting itself more deeply in the virgin soil of the child’s mind,

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always spreading wider its branches. There comes to be no relief, no escape from it. In my opinion such planting constitutes an interference with individual liberty which honest persons should hold basely dishonourable. Even though it be done for a so-called good purpose it is essentially unfair upon the child. You have no more right to contort a growing mind than a growing body."

"There you touch a difficult question of ethics, my son, regarding which much argument has been and, in all probability, will continue to be expended."

"But in my case, Father, the purpose had not even the excuse of being a good one. It was, as I now see it, nothing short of diabolical. — A strong word — yes, but listen. — I am an only child. I cannot remember my mother, save as a dream of youth and delicate freshness, of all-encompassing security. She disappeared, died, so they told me, when I was little more than a baby. But I wanted her. I cried for her. I cry for her still, grown man though I am. I shall be

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homesick till I find her—as I look to find her over there, on the other side death; though whether a few hours or many ages hence, I care not so long as I do find her at last. We shall speak of things that have happened here, she will forgive me if I hurt her, and shall both understand.—I wander again.—But my love for her is of the essence of the story, since it was upon this that he, her husband, my—my father, worked, fixing in my childish mind the idea that she had suffered an abominable wrong which it was my duty, some day, when I should reach manhood, to avenge. He did it cleverly, rather by insinuation than by direct speech; with the result that haunting misery and panic fear mingled with my yearning for her, provoking me to paroxysms of impotent rage against the person or persons who had injured her. I can never remember the time when I did not carry murder in my heart.”

“ Alas, my son ! ”

“ Yes—you have reason to pity me. And see, Father, the very indefiniteness of my

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knowledge served to inflame my imagination. A child's conception of dreadful things is irrational, unlimited, unrelated to laws of probability and of fact. I wanted to know more, yet dared not ask, and dreaded to be told. Thus my mind was in a state of perpetual conflict between morbid desire to hear and morbid fear of hearing. Yet, since by nature I am gay, tractable, unsuspicious, influenced by love of learning, affected by art, attracted by athletics and by sport, at moments I would forget. Life is so cunning and curious, so fertile in merry surprises and delights, that, with a healthy body and money in one's pocket, it is impossible, at times, not frankly to rejoice in it. Then by a well-timed word or look if ever, yielding myself unreservedly to the joy of living, I did forget, he would contrive to bring me back to the one idea. It was so, even when as a tiny boy I lost myself playing with my toys upon the floor of his library. Stealthily he would cease reading or correcting those interminable proof-sheets, consulting obscure manuscripts or transactions of learned

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societies ; and, silently fixing his eyes upon me, fill my little soul, I know not how, with the remembrance of my lovely mother's wrongs and my bloody mission to whosoever had wronged her. He is a world-famous scholar, whose researches have gained the admiration of all serious students. — A soft man, of gentle, polished manners and elegant speech, of great mental refinement, who instinctively shrinks in disgust from the rough talk and rough amusements of ordinary men. And I not only trusted, but revered him ; his great learning and the charm of his personality giving him an immense ascendancy over me. As I grew older, while my appreciation of his talents increased, my attitude towards him became protective. It seemed only becoming that I, young and fearless as I was, should stand between him and the soil and rub of vulgar things, guarding him with the chivalrous devotion with which one guards a delicate woman. He accepted my devotion, appeared gratified by it. How, then, could I dream that all the while he regarded me with implacable

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hostility; while, with unremitting ingenuity, he was shaping me to be the instrument of his vengeance, not only upon the person whom he hated, but upon myself?"

"Gently, my poor child. These are hideous accusations. Remember, it is your own wrong-doing, not the wrong-doing of others, which I wait to hear you retail."

"Ah! never fear, Father, we shall come to my sins quite soon enough. — You see the crisis was precipitated thus. When the time came for my military service I hesitated to leave him. We had never been parted, save for a few weeks at a time. My education had been carried on by tutors, under his immediate supervision. Where he went I went. And we travelled often, visiting most of the capitals and university cities of Europe, and seeing much of the best society in each. For his appeal is not limited to scholars. He is a favourite with women. We moved amid a sentimental flutter of petticoats. Even crowned heads have been gracious. — Oh! I deny none of his attractive qualities. He is charming, charming, wearing his vast

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learning lightly as a flower, yet with a dignity which can hardly fail at once to captivate and to impress.— But, in respect of my military training, he showed not only willingness but alacrity that I should serve. This surprised me. I was, indeed, a little hurt that he should be so ready to have me leave him. I could not quite understand it. — God knows — Satan knows, I understood it afterwards well enough ! ”

“ My son, my son —— ”

“ Wait a little, Father ; for if the Devil was not up to his ears in this accursed business, you, with all your knowledge of the crookedness of human nature, would find it precious difficult to say who was ! — I remember it all so well — the preparations, the departure, the arrival. By Bacchus, Father, but that was an amazing change, from the hot-house, cotton-wool, over-civilisation, the artificial ultra refinement of my life with him, to the barrack-room — the long hours, poor food, menial and mechanical duties, the horse-play, ribald talk, the brutal give and take of vigorous young men of all

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sorts and conditions herded indiscriminately together! — The human animal with a vengeance, Father, and at such very close quarters, was an astonishing revelation, I promise you. — And yet, the first disgust, revolt of natural pride and induced fastidiousness over, I rallied to it. Another, more virile, man awoke in me. I found myself as I had never found myself before. I recognised the life was sane and wholesome, because it was that of the average, not of the privileged merely. It was ennobled, too, by the spirit of comradeship, and by honest acceptance of, and indifference to, things I had been falsely taught to despise as degrading and gross. And I think, I think, there must be some measure of good in me; for I not only held my own merrily enough in this universal bear-garden, but made friends, was trusted and beloved. To win the suffrages of your social inferiors when stripped of all adventitious prestige and working side by side with them is, after all, to one's credit, is it not?"

“ Unquestionably it is — which will not be

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forgotten in the summing up of your earthly account.”

The young voice answered with graceful irony : — “ And that, at least, is matter for congratulation. For under the pitiless grip of Master Death I must gather up every crumb of comfort that I may. — See, Father, the regiment which I received orders to join was stationed in this city.”

“ Yes, my son,” the elder voice answered briefly and gravely.

“ As I understand it all now, a considerable amount of pressure must have been brought to bear upon the authorities by — by him to secure my being sent here. Ah! that apparently rose-water, tissue-paper, superfine piece of elegant erudition was very astute, very persistent, very resourceful! — It was precisely here, and no other where, that he intended me to be sent. That I should come here was the very heart of the conspiracy against me, the point towards which he had been silently working for years. And, the Devil helping, the plot certainly succeeded to perfection. We were quar-

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tered in the suppressed monastery of the Carmelites. You know the outer cloister of it, Father, with all the movement and colour of the Piazza d'Armi directly below ; and the wonderful view, across the miles of the Tiber valley, to where the fair hill-cities lie, on the blue-purple slopes of the snow-crowned Apennine, like clusters of gold and pearls upon the bosom of some velvet robe ? How often have I loitered there, watching the changing colours of the landscape, till I was half drunk with the divine loveliness of the scene ; and then, suddenly, turned fiercely heartsick, remembering my mother's jewels—locked away in her marriage chest, in our banker's strong room at Genoa—which may have rested upon the bosom of just some such royal blue-purple dress, above which the whiteness of her dear neck and shoulders rose, even as the whiteness of the snow rises above that glorious blue-purple of forest and of rock !—It is strange, Father, how constantly, from the time I joined my regiment here, the thought of her was present to me. Out of my former life she alone seemed to

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remain untouched. My love of her was as great, my longing for her as poignant, as ever ; though so much else, amid the coarse jovial activities of soldiering, had become fantastic to me and unreal. My sense of belonging to her only deepened. Although I revered him — her husband — I had always been queerly jealous of his relation to her. Now she seemed mine only, mine alone. And yet all the while, Father, little as I dreamed it, my evil fate was creeping nearer and nearer, as some savage beast of prey creeps stealthily through the jungle stalking its unconscious victim, intent to overtake and to destroy. — Ah ! is it not wicked, is it not unspeakably cruel, that I who love all fair things and would be a brother to all men should, at the will of another, have had murder thus planted in the very substance of my soul ? — It is unpardonable — an injustice so foul that it nauseates me. Stop your ears, Father, lest I blaspheme. But no, no, wait a little, have patience. I shall grow calm again. Only this long agony of powerless body and racing brain wears me

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out. I am nothing but thought, but memory, eyes and speech. And now my sight is failing. Black darkness closes down on me. — Ah! help, Father, help, or the blackness may grow red! Quick! call the nurses! — Make them give me some drug, some cordial, to keep consciousness in this wretched carcass till the whole is told. Quick, I tell you, Father — quick, or it may be too late! I can swallow still, I suppose, since I can still speak. Help, Father — I have lived in torment so long, secure at least that I shall die clean and at peace. Ah! blessed Saints, Holy Virgin, God in Heaven, have mercy. Spare me! — the blackness grows blood-red — ”

The young voice choked out in a strangled cry, that shook through the length and breadth of the room. The white-habited Sisters crossed themselves shuddering. The ill-conditioned Neapolitan conscript, turning on his face, bit at his pillow and whimpered in his sleep. Then the sharp tinkle of a hand-bell, at which the taller of the two Sisters, rising from her place at the table, moved

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swiftly down the ward, drew aside a fold of the screen, and, passing behind it, pushed it back, with a scraping sound on the bare boards, into place. Upon the whitewashed walls the afternoon sunshine lay clear and warm. Slanting upward it touched the cove of the vaultings, bringing fine details of classic mask and fabulous monster, emblematic wreath and fantastic half-human blossom into prominence. From the city without came a clang of bells, a clatter of hoofs on the hard quarries of hewn stone, a shout, the crack of a whip, the thin tremolo of a mandoline under the fingers of some itinerant musician, a shuffling of tired feet and the tap of a beggar's crutch on the pavement of the little piazza, and a sweetness of acacia blossom wafted in by the gay spring breeze. All the sounds were detached and fugitive; serving as broken accompaniment to the whisper of the nurse's garments, as she moved to and fro ministering to the sick man, and the grave accents of the priest reciting the Litany of the *Bona Mors*.

Then suddenly, against all these, indis-

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tinctly at first, yet imperatively, the young voice asserted itself : —

“ Tito, Bernardino, stop that, I say ! Silly fools, why will you fight ? La Carolina ? — But you smooth-cheeked innocents, in the name of reason don’t knife one another for the sake of that avaricious slut. It’s not you, don’t flatter yourselves, but your wretched little pennies she is after. Your pockets empty, you — either or both — are no more to her than a sucked orange. Think of your drill, not of harlots. — Yes, yes, I tell you it is done, finished. Though he was my friend, my host, my counsellor, and I loved him, I obeyed you. He trusted me and I betrayed him. I have killed the Prince — killed him, I tell you. Is your honour vindicated ? Are you satisfied at last ? — He is dead, dead, the mighty hunter, the beautiful, fierce creature, with the face like the wind and eyes like the cold northern sea — dead as mutton, betrayed, foully murdered. — All Italy rings with the crime. — Aie, aie, but what’s that ? What do you want ? Pah ! but the stuff is filthy. Why should I drink it ? — Physic ? — I am ill ?

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Don't lie. I have never known a day's illness in my life. — See here, Troilo Baldeschi, you shameless brigand, is it not an iniquity to poison the defenders of your country with hog's-wash such as this? Take warning, you old miscreant, for I swear by the whole classic pantheon that, if it happens again, we will tie you hand and foot and fill you up with the liquor of your own wine-shop till you burst. — Ah! where am I? The sunshine? — All hail, Phœbus Apollo! The blessed life-giving sunshine, and a woman singing of love and the dear pains of love, among the vines, below the city wall. — Sweet, I come, I come. — Ah! the pretty little pink ears! — Shall I give you pearls to hang in them? Kiss me then, pretty one — a kiss for every pearl. — A nun? — no, no. — With such a voice as that, a voice to drag the heart out of a man's body, you must be a bride of earth, my rose, my dove, rather than a bride of heaven. — And a priest? — What? — Yes, I remember. — Oh! life, beautiful, warm, laughing life, but is it not bitter to bid you farewell so soon! I would like to have

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been your playfellow somewhat longer, till the years grew ripe, and I could reap some harvest of my own sowing. — Sister, I am helpless. Wipe my face. I am weak, and the foolish tears will come. Thank you — and forgive me, Sister, if I have been discourteous and scandalised you by wild talk. — Yes, I will try to drink the rest, since you wish it, though really the stuff is filthy. See, am I not a docile patient? It steadies my brain. — Again thanks. Now we need trouble you no further, till Master Death comes along to claim me. You might pray for me though. — You will? — Good. — Father, shall we go forward? Are you ready?”

“I am ready, my son.”

“You know the fencing-school kept by Angelo Marozzo in the Via Felcino?”

A perceptible pause, then the answer, as with effort, painfully: —

“I have known it, my son.”

“There were some score of us, officers and men, who used to go there frequently when off duty to practise both fencing and sword-play. I was fairly capable in both. I

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became very fond of the great cavernous hall, hung round with trophies of arms, and portraits of former professors of the art. There was a certain air of distinction, of chivalry, about the place which pleased me. And my æsthetic sense was satisfied by the sight of the lithe red-trouserred young figures, the short masterful ejaculations of the fencers and the stamp of their feet, the sharp rattle of the foils, and the flashes of white light given off by them against that dim, mellow, spacious background. You may recall, Father, that a low divan is set on a narrow dais running along the back of the hall. It is covered in worn crimson and gold velvet. And—possibly you have yourself been among them once?—it is the custom of Marozzo's patrons, gentlemen of the town, to stroll in and sit there, talking and smoking and watching the play."

"I recall the facts, my son."

"Among others who frequented the place, Father, there was a very tall man ——"

"Yes—continue ——"

"From his manner and bearing, and the

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respect with which he was treated, one could see he was a great personage, although his clothes were old and peculiar in cut. One could see, too, that physically he was remarkably strong — strong as a greyhound is strong, lean and muscular, light on his feet and remarkably graceful. His beard was long and forked. His eyes were a cold steel grey, clear and steady as those of one accustomed to look across vast spaces. In youth he must have been golden-haired. Now he was grey. And his face, Father, was unlike any face I ever saw. It was wonderful. I have no word for it, but that it was like the wind, untamed, untamable, a keen wind which comes from very far."

The young voice stopped, awed, as it seemed, into silence by remembrance. The priest moved slightly in his chair.

"And then," he said hoarsely, "and then?"

"Ah! Father, but it hurts!"

"Still go forward, my poor child. If the way is set with thorns, they are, in part at least, of your own planting."

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“I remember there was a cold rain, turning to sleet, the first time I saw him at Marozzo's. The breath of winter was upon us. The streets were deserted, raked by piercing blasts from the fastnesses of the Apennine, the pavements grey, the houses grim and dark. All day the barracks had been dank and chill as a vault. It was delightful to get into the fencing-school, with the lights and the thick fragrant warmth of a fire of monster logs upon the open hearth. We broke in noisily, laughing and shouting, boylike. Well, we were only boys. But suddenly I saw this stranger, this very tall man, this great gentleman, leaning back on the divan, his legs crossed, nursing his right elbow with his left hand as he smoked. He looked at us, in our somewhat uproarious entrance, not unkindly, but with the slightly scornful tolerance of a quite superior being. After a moment or two his eyes singled me out, Father. I felt them ; felt too that the scorn went out of his expression, and that something intent, very still yet questioning, came into it. And I—I was

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at once sobered and profoundly excited. I wanted to know him, to enter into some personal relation with him. I wanted to compel his admiration and his praise. At the same time the thought of my mother took me sharply by the throat. Whether I loved or hated him I could not tell; but all the laughter, all the light-hearted good-fellowship, fell away from me. I no longer wanted to play. I wanted to fight. I wished there were no buttons on the foils. I wanted to feel the point of my weapon go home, to wound, to draw blood, Father, to see someone trip and stagger, and fall dead."

"Let us be thankful that there is a long interval between desire and the accomplishment of desire, between the thought and the deed. For it is by our deeds that we are judged, in God's infinite mercy, my son, not by our thoughts or feelings. Were it not so, few, indeed, would escape damnation."

"Comfortable words, Father. I thankfully accept them. — Yet, with this profound excitement upon me, I fenced as I had never fenced before. I was swift and un-

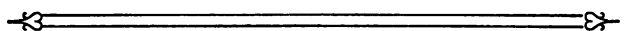
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erring in parry, cool yet dangerous in thrust, my hand sure, my eye true. My own quickness and resource were delicious to me. I felt as though I too were made of fine steel, as though I could never tire. I forgot no one of the punctilious courtesies of the perfect fencer, whose temper should be under as delicate control as his weapon. In assault after assault, as I proved victor, enthusiasm gained the whole company. My fellow-soldiers, leaving their own play, gathered round—officers and men alike—applauding, calling my name, encouraging me, even betting upon the event as though some big prize were at stake. I was the centre upon which emotion and interest turned. Even my adversaries forgave defeat in their admiration of my skill, and joined generously in the chorus of praise. Yet to me, Father, nothing of all this mattered, because the very tall man with the face like the wind—though I knew that he watched me—sat apart and made no sign. And the praise of all the rest, even that of our master, Marozzo himself, was as ashes in

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my mouth until this one man should speak. I had taken off my mask and stood breathing, after a long and brilliant bout with Niccolo Santi, Marozzo's second in command. He had seldom been worsted by any one of us before, poor fellow, and was crestfallen and sulky. The younger men did not spare him, for he was something of a bully and they took a wicked pleasure in seeing him put to shame. But just when the clamour was loudest he—the tall man—rising from his place on the divan, came to the edge of the dais and stood there idly flicking the ash off his cigar. A hush fell on all, as though an event of great moment became suddenly imminent. I was exultant, yet impatient. What did he propose to do or to say? Why had he refused me recognition so long? I looked up at him with a movement of defiance, and he looked back at me very strangely. Just at that moment a young officer, standing close by, murmured: '*Dio, Dio*, but, allowing for the difference of age, are not the two amazingly alike!'—Then he spoke, Father, and his voice had an odd

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grating tone in it. 'See here, Marozzo,' he said, 'surely, my good friend, it is time you took a foil yourself and chastised this precocious pupil of yours? The honour of us of the elder generation demands it.' 'Take a foil yourself, Prince,' Marozzo answered. 'You are a finer swordsman than I—the finest probably in all Europe.'—But there—what ails you, Father? Why do you bow your head and cover your eyes? Do I become tedious and weary you? Ah! pardon me if I do so. Think Death is inevitable. The end is soon now, and I am young and so dearly in love with living. It fortifies my spirit, in face of the tragedy of dissolution, to tell of these gallant doings in which I shall never take part any more."

And the austere elder voice replied brokenly:—

"Rather should I ask pardon, my son. Old habits, old affections, are as a chain upon the soul; and for a moment the natural man in me—to my shame—was stronger than the priest. But the weakness is passed.

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Speak, therefore, in full security. Tell me the whole without reserve or distrust."

"Never fear. The little human touch makes for confidence rather than distrust, Father, if I may venture to say so."

"And did he—the Prince—fence with you?"

"No, he refused, and, as I thought, too curtly for courtesy. This let the devil loose in me, as only insult can. Marozzo was fresh; I stale, since I had been fencing half the afternoon. He is a past master in the art; I little more after all than a novice. Moreover, he had his prestige as a teacher to support him, and the care for his professional reputation which was endangered. Some cried that the conditions were hardly fair to me, that the test should be put off till a time when I too was fresh. But I would not wait. For nearly half an hour the struggle lasted—youth pitted against experience, burning determination against finished science. And youth won, Father. Glorious youth won! When it was over Marozzo very nobly embraced me, holding

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me by the hand, making me handsome speeches before them all; but I was too exhausted to answer fittingly, or even to comprehend. I could barely see or hear. Everything turned black—as it did here a few minutes ago, Father. I reeled, and should have fallen; but the man with the face like the wind, driving all the crowd to right and left as though they were so many withered leaves, swept down on me; and, incredible in the greatness of his strength, gathered me up bodily in his arms, carried me to the divan and laid me there, unbuttoned the breast of my fencing-jacket to give me air, saying caressing words under his breath, meanwhile, as a mother might to her sick child, his hands infinitely gentle, and his eyes suffused with tears. Then I knew that I did not hate him, Father, but that I loved him surpassingly, with a jealous passion of love—loved him as I had never loved any living being before. But when the deathly faintness passed and I came to myself, he was gone, and all the world seemed empty of music as a broken drum.”

CHAPTER II

THE young voice ceased. For a while there was silence, the sounds of the city without hushed as though in suspense and expectation. The sun drew down in the west, while the earthy chill and sense of desolation which, in southern lands, heralds its setting became very evident. The ill-favoured Neapolitan conscript, in his bed in the far corner of the ward, moaned, shivering in his sleep. At length, as one rousing himself with an effort from the obsession of some painful train of thought, the priest spoke.

“And then, my son,” he asked hoarsely, “what followed?”

“This, Father, that some week or two later, with a stately courtesy, yet with a certain hesitancy and wistfulness—which

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touched and in a manner shamed me, I being so much the younger, an unknown, untried man — he, the Prince Amilcare — ”

“ It is superfluous to mention names, my son.”

“ But, Father, you living in this place must have guessed by now, you must know ? ”

“ And if I do know,” somewhat sternly, “ does not that make the mention of names only the more superfluous ? I have allowed you much latitude in the manner of your confession out of consideration for your state ; but, even so, there are rules to be observed and limits which may not be exceeded.”

“ You are harsh, Father. And I — ah ! is it not cruel to lie here, all the pride of my manhood humbled in the dust ? — I am helpless.”

“ I have no desire to be harsh, my son. Just in as far as I appear so, I betray my trust, for which shortcoming I shall most assuredly receive due chastisement. But I am very sorrowful. And, as I listen, the

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inflexible justice of the Almighty is increasingly brought home to me. Though He hold His hand and seem to forget, yet, in the end and by ways they least look for, He will have from every man the full price of his sinning. So be it. I bow before His judgments; yet they are very searching. — Now, my poor child, go forward.”

“But, Father, but—pardon me—I cannot help seeing that you stand closer to all this business than I supposed.”

“Go forward.—Where I may stand in relation to it matters nothing. I am priest, you are my penitent—all, my son, all, save for the shame of momentary human weakness, begins and ends there.”

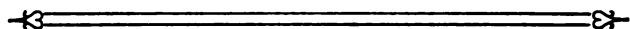
To which the young voice, not without a point of irony in the tones of it, made answer lightly:—

“As you will, Father. Obviously, things being as they are just now, it is for you to dictate terms and for me to accept them without demur.—Know then that he, the very tall man with the face like the wind and eyes like the cold northern sea, making

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my little accomplishment of fencing his kindly excuse for so doing, sought me out and invited me to visit him. I accepted eagerly, the more so that no word was said between us of the strange moment when he carried me in his arms and mothered me. I was very careful not to break silence on that point; but to let him suppose I had been unconscious of what passed, too faint for sight or hearing. He lived — as conceivably you are aware, Father — in a great, frowning palace, presenting a positive cliff of masonry when you look up at it from the street. But within it is generous in space, splendid in furnishing; and delicious, opening as it does, at the back, upon a colonnaded sun-bathed loggia, which commands the rose-hedges, thickets of fragrant shrubs, the cypresses, statues, and cool, dripping fountains of a high-walled garden. To me it was as a glimpse of paradise, a return to some lost Eden of my dreams, after the rough actualities of the barrack. And yet, for all its voluptuous beauty, a certain austerity lay upon the place. There

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was no Eve in that fair Eden, Father ; although, watching his expression at moments and hearing his speech, one knew that he too — he, the Prince — must have been among the great lovers. — The lovers who remember and who are faithful, because they have loved not woman, not the sex merely — pushed by the natural desire of mate for mate — but one woman, to them unique and sacred, who for ever holds their heart in her two hands, while her lips cling to their lips, though of those dear hands and lips alike only the joyless joys of memory are left. — And, by Bacchus, what a lover he must have been ! If the purest and proudest of women should risk her salvation for his sake, who dare blame, or dare wonder ? To be loved and wooed by the wind, Father — think of it — picture it — by the wind and the northern sea ! ”

“ Hush, my son, — softly, lest you pass the bounds of that which is permissible. However great the temptation, sin remains sin. — You wander. Restrain your imagination. Collect yourself. You forget.”

“ No, Father, I do not forget, I remember.

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I look back along the years and piece the fragments of this cruel splendid puzzle together; and, so doing, as I hope to be forgiven, I forgive. Yes, lying here broken, stripped of happiness, miserably dying, I understand, and acquiesce, and, out of the frustrated glory of my life, forgive. — But not him, not the other man, the superfine soft-tongued scientist and savant, bowing down and kissing the cloven foot of the devil to bring about my destruction. May he burn, Father! May the tongues of hell-fire lick his skeleton dry and white; while, imprisoned within it, like some vile, frantic beast imprisoned within a white-hot iron cage, his soul and senses remain sensibly quick and awake! Yes, burn most fastidious gentleman; and, as you burn, blaspheme in twenty different languages, most erudite philologist, if you will! But expect no pity from me in response to your pentecostal eloquence, for to me you have very certainly shown none. Neither the trust of childhood nor the devotion of youth moved you.— The marble pavement runs with blood. From dawn

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to dark the red blot stains the gracious sky. And it is your doing—yours, not mine. You were merciless alike to mother and to son. So burn, burn! — But where am I? — What! the sweet singing is done and the sun's busy setting? And it is so early yet. Surely both song and sunshine might have stayed to comfort one a while longer. Oh! I am very tired, tired of waiting for I know not what—for you, my lovely mother, or for Master Death, who guides me along the black avenue which, as I fondly hope, leads to you?— Winter has come all of a moment. I am cold. Ah! shame of impotence, my hands are useless. I cannot draw the blankets up about me.— Thanks, my Prince; that's better. I am nothing but a poor cry-baby; still your touch is kind, gentle, and strong as that first day we met at Marozzo's, when I vanquished the fine old fencing-master and fainted.— Yes, yes, Father—I recognise you. I have been dreaming. It all comes back to me. I am in hospital, dying—and I was making my confession, telling you the true history, which all Italy has been mad to know,

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of how and why Prince Amilcare was murdered —— ”

“ Even so, my son. You were telling me of your first visit to his house.”

“ True, Father, and we made an indiscreet little excursion into questions of the affections which had to be cut short, eh ? — But, believe me, it was very rarely his and my talk touched on personal or private matters. About such my host was reticent and it was not for me to ask questions. The eternal feminine might have been expunged from the categories of being for all it appeared to matter to him. Rather did he recount to me wonder-stories of his travels and hunting in far distant lands, which fired my young imagination with desire of adventure and of danger. We would sit — he a model of heroic grace, I somewhat clumsy in my ill-fitting private’s uniform and heavy service boots — in his museum, a great hall opening on to the loggia and overlooking the smiling garden to where, between the huddled house-roofs, a noble view of sky and hill and plain disclosed itself. Those

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were golden hours, Father, full of virile romance. The hall is spacious and lofty, with red walls, a white marble pavement and pillars, to it; but, large though it is, it is crowded, save for the wide central gangway leading from door to door, with the spoils of his hunting—with stuffed beasts, some ranged in tall glass cases, some standing free, the heads and skulls of others hung upon the walls, the skins of them outspread upon the glistening floor. Lions, wolves, bears, antelope and gazelle—elk and bison from the far north, mountain sheep from the Roof of the World, tiger and leopard from the hot East, jaguar and puma from the Amazon forests, ungainly yet graceful giraffe from the vast African champaign—all manner of strange, and beautiful, and terrible creatures herded together, silent and motionless, staring at one continuously, fixedly, with bright unseeing eyes. Cannot you picture it, Father; and I sitting there enthralled by the magic of his rapid speech, conscious of all those crowding beasts as background to his wonderful figure and face? Yet, at

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moments, I shrank somewhat, as before a mystery of untoward fate. For in all the stories he told me there was an echo of something barbaric, a savage fearlessness and unrest singularly far removed from the spirit of our puny modern world—the drive and scorch of some inward fever that could only be assuaged with killing. He was not cruel, as I understand it. He had no disposition to inflict pain wantonly, for the mere base pleasure of inflicting pain. To me it was more as though some one life and one death having come between himself and happiness—by which I mean the full development of his powers, ambitions, and nature—he was pushed by inextinguishable resentment and disgust to destroy life, to kill and always to kill.”

To which the elder voice answered slowly and sadly : —

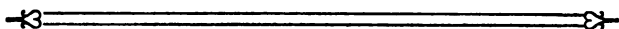
“ Each heart knows its own bitterness, my son. It may have been thus.”

‘ Yes, Father, I perceived that he had suffered. A great tragedy had driven him out into the wilderness to kill. Of this I

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was increasingly convinced as we became more intimate. I was conscious of some hidden thing in his life of which he was resolute never to speak; yet which dictated his attitude towards me, and had come very near breaking bounds and declaring itself clearly that first day when I vanquished Marozzo in the fencing-school. As the weeks went by, passing from winter to spring and to joy of early summer, our friendship deepened. Every hour that I could snatch from my military duties I spent in his society; and, to make my coming and going easier, without ceremony of servants or of inquiry, he gave me the key of the little door, made of heavy oak and studded with great iron bolts, set in the wall of the garden. It opens on to a narrow roughly stepped alley, leading down to the barracks and the Piazza d'Armi. It was a door of merry and murderous secrets, so I fancied. Many a member of the princely house, in past years, must have slipped out that way on desperate errands of vengeance or of love, eh, Father?"

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“ Even so, in all probability, my son.”

“ I blessed it, since it saved me some half-mile walk round by the Corso ; and minutes are precious when your leisure is brief. He bade me, if when coming thus unexpectedly I did not find him, take possession and either read or rest. Often I was tired enough with the routine of soldiering, drill, sham-fights, road marching, let alone the round of menial work in barracks which falls to the share of every private. I found it refreshing to lie in a long chair and drowse in the great stately place flanked, on either hand, by that fantastic bodyguard of stuffed beasts, who, as I passed insensibly from waking to sleeping, would seem to come alive and move stealthily to and fro. It was as though, believing me unconscious, they crept closer, taking counsel together in a language of signs, of moppings and mowings, intelligible to themselves but baffling human comprehension, conspiring together, plotting some evil which was surely to come. More than once it happened to me, resting alone there in the twilight, to start all bathed in sweat

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out of my sleep and rush on to the loggia possessed by a sense of horror I could neither combat nor control. Then the peace and beauty of the half-seen garden, and the soft gloom between the houses with their dim lights where the great view lay, would soothe and steady me. I would laugh at my silly scare in that taxidermic menagerie, while life assumed a sane and happy aspect once more, my friendship for my host being without doubt or misgiving, and the thought of my mother coming to me sweetly, as a benediction, with no haunting obligation of vengeance in its train.

“But in mid-May, Father, our regiment received orders to move up north to Milan ; and, though change is always grateful to youth, I went very sorrowfully to bid the Prince good-bye. It was a crystalline evening, full of pictures and of poetic suggestion, at the end of the first real summer day. All the population of the city was in the streets. Our men had made themselves well liked during our stay, and our band was giving a farewell concert before the Prefettura in

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the Piazza Vittor' Emanuele. The gallant music reached us in the garden, where the air was rich with the scent of lemon and orange blossom, while bats flittered to and fro squeaking in the velvet dusk. We paced the paved pathways, the Prince and I, his hand on my shoulder. I am tall too, Father, taller than most men, though not so tall as he. We spoke little, as far as I can remember, the emotion which held us both being vital to the point of refusing speech as between man and man. I tried to thank him and to tell him how great a boon his friendship had been to me ; but he cut me short. ' If I had a son,' he said, ' I could not ask better than that he should perfectly resemble you in person and in character.' ' Then, when I am free, I may come back ?' I asked him. ' You may always come back,' he answered. ' And to that end take the key of the door in the wall away with you, and come in by it when you please. I may be here, or the hunger of travel and of sport may drive me, once more, to wander. But the years accumulate, and I grow less disposed to

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wander long or far. Therefore in all probability you will find me waiting for you when you come. And with that, Father, he kissed me on either cheek, and pressed me against his breast, and gave me his blessing. Then he turned sharply away and was lost to sight amid the fragrant groves of flowering trees. And I—I—blind with tears, bowing my head, stumbled through the doorway into the outer darkness of the malodorous cut-throat alley, a weight heavy as death at my heart."

The voice died out in a groan, then rose suddenly in passionate cadence.

"Listen, Father. The Angelus is ringing from San Ercolano. I know the tone of the bell. It is cracked, yet I love it. I heard it so often in those good days, across the memory of which my own hand has drawn a bloody curtain, when I rested in the hall of the stuffed beasts or paced the paved pathways of his garden with my friend, the Prince."

The nuns had risen from their places and stood on either side the well-scrubbed table,

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their hands folded, their eyes downcast as they reverently recited the Angelic Salutation. This finished, each crossed herself. Then the one deftly and quickly lighted the oil-lamps, which, set at intervals along the ward, supplied a somewhat pensive illumination. While the other closed the tall casements, thereby excluding the unhealthy exhalations which rise from the soil at sunset; but excluding also the comfortable fellowship of human life and the normal activities of it present in the city without. Confined thus, within the four walls of this place of suffering and death, from the vaulted, dimly discerned ceiling of which lustful god and leering satyr looked down, the suspense, the insidious alarm, induced by the voices of the unseen speakers, was painfully intensified. There appeared no escape, no outlet, from the grasp of all-dominant fear. In the stillness which succeeded her return to her place at the table, after lighting the lamps, the younger nun was seized with a nervous tremor, turning her head sharply and glancing over her shoulder, as though expectant that

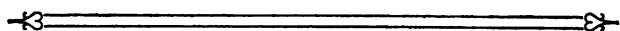
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terror, in bodily form, stood close behind her chair.

At last the priest spoke again, in tones of grave admonition and encouragement, to which the sick man returned, also gravely : —

“No, Father, it is not further failure of strength which keeps me tongue-tied. I can hold Death at bay for some time yet. Indeed the confusion of mind which has more than once, in this long sad hour, overcome me seems passed. I shall not lapse into delirium again. I am master now of my own thought. It is as though my poor body, abdicating its rights in final despair, had ceased to dispute with my brain such measure of vitality as is left in me. Thus, I imagine, the disembodied spirit feels. I see my past life as a whole. I reckon clearly with its emotions and its actions. I pass readily and surely from point to point. Therefore it is no incapacity to tell which restrains me; but rather the anguish and the shame of telling—and of telling you, Father—you, if I divine rightly, of all possible persons upon earth.”

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The other answered with a great gentleness : —

“ Have no thought of me save as of one who has been called in right of his office, and through a singular dispensation of Providence, to listen to you and to help. The true priest, like the Master he serves, is the friend of all sinners. Remember, moreover, the deeper your self-abasement the nearer you approach a state of grace. Brace yourself therefore, my son, to the execution of your task. He who has won the praise of so fearless a man as him of whom you have just told me, should at least prove no coward. In face even of torment he should disdain complaint.”

“ Ah ! and in good truth it is nothing short of torment. Therefore, since this thing has to be endured, I swear that endurance shall not go unwitnessed. See, Father, to keep you worthy company I invoke the presence of the dead.—Hail oh ! Prince, dear Prince, and whatever region of this tremendous universe your fierce and lonely soul now inhabits, I call on it, from thence, to come—to come,

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us get to work with that cunning little devil of a flaying-knife. — But who's whispering? Order them out. I will have no listeners here save of my own choosing. — What! the Sisters praying? Ah! that's another matter. Let them pray on, for the living who die and the dead who live. Both need their prayers, God knows. They are frightened? — Sweet, saintly souls, though they harbour stranger guests than they bargained for, they will take no harm. We — the Prince Amilcare and I — hold them in tender reverence; and you, Father, represent a sort of moral and spiritual lightning-conductor. — Unseemly? — Yes, I mock, I laugh, because — because — well, that busy little devil of a knife, you see! It's most uncommonly nasty, I tell you, to feel it snickering its way in under the beautiful, smooth, live skin. — So, pray for me, Holy Mother Mary in Heaven; pray holy women here upon earth — pray — and now let us begin.

“ It was thus, Father. Our regiment was quartered at Milan for about six months, and then ordered to Genoa. The date of

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my discharge was at hand. I had risen to the rank of sergeant-major, and had been offered my commission. The authorities wished to keep me, believing that I had a distinct gift for military affairs. I was glad and flattered, ready enough to adopt the army as my permanent profession. But, in response to my letters to him upon the subject, I received news that he—he—my father had been gravely ill in Paris, where he had passed the winter, and was now upon his way to the Riviera, his physicians still considering the case an anxious one. The habits of childhood and youth die very hard in one. It must be so, or the extent to which this information affected me would be inexplicable. I had not seen him for the better part of the last two years. He had been travelling, and my periods of leave were too short to allow of my joining him. I had written dutifully at stated intervals, but with a consciousness that my letters became more and more perfunctory. Some fundamental difference in our two natures was in process of development.

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In interests and sympathy we were drifting apart. I retained my reverence for science and scholarship; but I looked at them from a new standpoint. In a sense I had become a realist—a worshipper not of words and of books, but of deeds and of action. My field of research and the source to me of poetic inspiration lay, not in the history of humanity in the past or in theories regarding humanity's ideal future, but in humanity as I found it right here, under my hand, in myself, in my comrades, in the barrack-yard, in the streets of the city, in the common events and emotions of every day. Language was only worth what you could say with it; and, in my opinion, were you skilful enough, you could say just as fine things as had ever been said. You see, during these two years I had practically been shorn of the privileges that are conferred by money and by rank. I had been compelled to look at life, not from the hill-top where dwell the few, but from the dead level of the many dwellers in the plain. This had made me neither socialist nor revolutionary, Father; but it

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had made me democratic, specially in my relation to learning and to art. I had parted with many artificial standards of thought and of taste. In my mind and soul I was free. Yet, when the news of his illness reached me, the pieties—so called—of the earlier period revived strangely. The old sense of supreme obligation towards him seized me. My instinct was to go to him and shield him, the soft, exquisite, easily jarred being, from precisely all that coarse average of living which I counted the finest poetry of a sane man's outlook. It was inconsistent, illogical in the highest degree, I know. Yet I was driven, possessed, obsessed by it. I thrust aside the question of my commission, stripped off my private's uniform—not without a sob in my throat—they had been very happy, those days of hard work, of discipline and obedience as a light-hearted son of the people—arrayed myself in the garments of the modern fashionable world once again and went."

A heavy pause, which the priest's voice presently broke.

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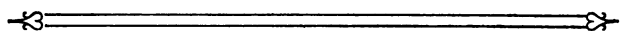
“And then, my son, what followed?”

“This — that I found him in a luxurious suite of rooms in one of the best hotels in Nice. As usual a little court surrounded him — men of distinction in letters and science, plus a flutter of sentimental petticoats. I hint at no scandal, Father. He enjoyed the advantages of his peculiar temperament. He was as cold as a fish. Such men are immensely attractive to that very large section of virtuous womanhood which runs greedily after perfectly safe forms of moral danger! He appeared to me as finished, as consummately civilised as ever; but I perceived that physically he had suffered. His face was grey and drawn. He moved languidly, leaning upon the arm of his valet, or upon a cane. And this reinforced my loyalty, causing me self-reproach for my long absence and even for my own splendid health. It seemed unfeeling to be so young and strong in face of his languor and weakness. I remember, when I arrived, bending over his hand in silent pity and tenderness and kissing it as I might that of some delicate woman. I

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remember, too, the keenly observant expression with which he surveyed me. — ‘ You have grown into a remarkably handsome young man, Carlo,’ he said, ‘ and of a type which your mother supremely admired. You would have satisfied her maternal pride ! ’ — With that he closed his eyes, smiling, his lips pinched together ; then opened his eyes wide, all the whites of them showing as he gazed fixedly at me. It was a trick of his which I could remember from my earliest childhood, when he wanted to recall to me the idea that he had determinately essayed to implant in me — that of my mother’s wrongs and my own duty of vengeance. And the effect, now as of old, Father, was like that of some disintegrating magic. Touched as I was by pity for his illness, I made no effort to resist his influence. My will was neutralised. The last two years and masculine experiences of them became dim and shadowy to me. My healthy self-confidence evaporated. Once again the magnetism of his concentration of purpose mastered me. His desire and demand, though unstated in

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words, filled all my outlook. I ceased to belong to myself. I became his tool, his chattel, once again. — Ah! the cruelty, Father, the unpardonable injustice of thus enslaving the mind of a child, and thereby wresting the life of a man from its natural bent and development!

“Looking back, I recognise with what consummate skill he handled me from the hour of his recovered ascendancy until the psychological moment arrived for final disclosure. He kept me constantly near him, affecting great pleasure in my society. He praised my intelligence to the gentlemen of his entourage, my filial devotion to the ladies. Possibly in the latter quarter his recommendations were uncalled for, since those charming persons had displayed a warm interest in me from the outset. And I have no quarrel with the good things of this world, Father. My instincts are far from ascetic. Therefore, when petted, flattered, fêted, I accepted the position readily and made the most of it, for these wealthy high-bred worldlings trifled with an excellent grace. They

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did nothing worth doing, granted ; but they did nothing in so artistic a manner that one could not but applaud and admire. Yet at moments, as I am glad to remember since it shows the finer nature was still alive in me, I was overcome by nostalgia for my poor, discarded, ill-fitting uniform, for bodily fatigue and the dreamless sleep which follows it, for the coarse jovial life of the barrack-room, and the insistent bugle-calls hounding me out to rough work, or setting me at liberty for hardly less rough play. Then, for a while, I would chafe under the restraints and the numberless insincerities of my present hot-house existence, which became cloying to my palate as a diet of cream cakes and truffles after one of black bread and onions. But these revulsions of feeling soon passed, Father ; and the soul-drugging round of frivolity and amusement would again absorb me. And it was in the midst of all this, to him as the crown of calculated and long-sustained effort, to me as a shattering earthquake shock, that the horrible disclosure came.

“That day he—the devil’s spawn whom I

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trusted and sheltered — was in better health. It was the carnival week, and I had been to a masked ball, in the town, with several smart young men of my acquaintance. In respect of its feminine members, the company had not been precisely immaculate, and our gaiety ended in something not far removed from debauch. It was after sunrise when I returned to the hotel. Then, fearing that he might want me, I did not go to bed, but had a bath, dressed, and held myself at his disposition. And it happened that he wished to go out. We drove down to the Promenade des Anglais, which was crowded with fashionable people, while little parties of grotesquely clad masqueraders threaded their way, some boisterously, some slyly, in and out of the throng. The day was amazing in beauty; sea and sky blazing with rich, clear colour; the town, gardens, mountains, glittering in the sunshine; Nature, filled with the energy of the vernal equinox, rising effulgent, triumphant, prodigal in desire and in loveliness, from her winter sleep. Not solemn preparation for the great Christian

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fast, but the hardly restrained licence of a great pagan festival seemed to strike the note of the whole scene, to which those strayed revellers, in their gaudy incredible costumes, put the finishing touch of extravagance. And it was under these abnormal conditions — I somewhat unsteady in nerves, and brain, too, from my wild night—that he had the inhuman callousness to strike me! He knew that I was at a disadvantage. But he knew, also, that whatever engagement I might be betrayed into making in this hour of weakness, I should carry out to the letter, — however repugnant it might be to me — in the hour of my strength.

“He proposed that we should get out and walk, letting the carriage follow slowly in the roadway. The animated scene amused him. For a while he talked lightly and wittily, with a wealth of literary illustration, of all that it suggested and was in any way allied to. Then, insensibly, his manner wholly charming and beneficent, he led me to speak of myself; of the two years of my soldiering, and especially of my stay in this

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city. I was surprised at his knowledge of the place and its inhabitants. So as to converse with greater freedom we moved out of the crowd, and, seeking a couple of sheltered chairs in the public pleasure-grounds, sat down. I can hear the rustle of the gay breeze among the grey-green, ribbon-like leaves of the towering gum-trees, smell the tasselled blossom of the yellow mimosas, and see, beyond the movement of the traffic and the many-coloured crowd, the sapphire splendour of the sea. Those were my last happy moments, Father. Since then all is dark, hideous, and shameful, a desert of sorrow beneath my feet, above me a sky of blood.

“ I suppose want of sleep and the intoxicating beauty of the day combined to make me light-headed. In any case I passed the bounds of reticence which usually held me in his presence; and, encouraged by his apparent sympathy, poured out my heart in speech. I spoke, not only of my stay in this city, Father, but of the mental development which had come to me here, the deepening

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of my humanity, of my relation to my fellow conscripts, of my new ideals and ideas, both political and artistic. I told him of a state of society, of standards of thought and conduct, which were new to him. He was really interested ; and yet all the while, little as I perceived it, he was pushing me, luring me, towards a fixed and determined point. He meant me to speak of the Prince. And of the Prince at last — reluctantly, as a man who gives away something very dear to him — I spoke. I told of his great kindness and hospitality, and our close friendship ; of my engagement to go back and visit him, in token of which he had bidden me keep the key of the old door in the wall, which lets one out of the garden into the cut-throat alley running down to the Piazza d'Armi.

“ ‘ See, here it is,’ I said, taking the key from my breast-pocket and letting it lie in the palm of my hand. And, as I did so, Father, a strange wave of desolation passed over my soul. My sight was blurred. Indeed I could have wept aloud with regret, as for some lost Eden ; with dread, as of

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some unknown evil which rose menacing and malignant before me. — ‘It may appear to you childish,’ I went on, ‘but I have never parted with this key, day or night, since Prince Amilcare gave it me. I have a superstitious feeling towards it, as though it were the key of destiny, ordained, long years ago before my birth, to unlock the innermost meanings of my life. I find it difficult to believe that it is the recent gift of a casual acquaintance; rather do I seem to have a strange inherent right to it, as if it had been used a thousand times by persons of my own name and race.’

“And there I stopped, Father, for looking round at him I was utterly confounded by that which I beheld. His whole aspect had altered, and the alteration struck me the more forcibly because it appeared in an even greater degree moral than physical. He, always so calm, so graceful and distinguished in bearing, sat crouched together, cringing yet malevolent as some wretched gaol-bird or outcast tramp. His face was agitated, distorted almost. His thin lips

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were twisted into a sneering death's-head smile. His eyes were appalling in their vindictive eagerness. Notwithstanding the glorious sun-heat, he shook from head to foot, vainly trying to steady himself by clasping his hands upon the knob of his lacquered cane.

“ I sprang up and leaned over him, partly to screen him from observation. I tried to persuade myself that he had been seized by an attack of some insidious malady. Only thus was I willing to account for his extraordinary expression and attitude. Incoherently I implored him to speak to me, to tell me what he suffered, to let me call his valet, send for his physician, convey him to the waiting carriage so that we might immediately return to the hotel. But he motioned me excitedly to be silent. ‘ Give me time ! ’ he gasped. ‘ In a few moments I shall recover myself.’

“ I could not stand there idle, Father, and watch him. The spectacle was too painful, too humiliating. I moved a few steps aside and looked away, with an instinct of finding

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help in outward things from the strain of my emotions. Ah! Father, even now the thought of the irony of my surroundings racks me. The beauty, the movement, the music, the laughter, the amorous breeze in the tree-tops, the plunge of the sapphire sea—the brilliant human world so thoughtlessly, recklessly keeping carnival; the superb world of Nature wanton, as it seemed, with vernal desire of increase! And, on the other hand, to me the swift personal menace of some nameless calamity, conjoined with the sight of the famous scholar, virtuoso and savant, fallen to I know not what incredible abyss of degradation! I fought with the violence of my impressions, my reason wrestling with the blind panic and disgust which invaded me. The struggle was a desperate one. Healthy and fearless as I was, Father, I could have turned and fled. It taxed every grain of fortitude I possessed to maintain a calm demeanour; and, since his near neighbourhood had become strangely repellent to me, to return and take my place beside him again.

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“When I did so, I was relieved to see that he had, in a great measure, regained his normal appearance. He leaned back languidly in his chair, his mouth no longer distorted by that hideous *rictus*. His eyes were half closed, their expression veiled and indefinite. His air was that of dignified, if weary, composure. When he began to speak, I noted that his enunciation was refined to the point of mannerism and his voice soft, finely modulated, as ever. The transformation was so complete, that I entertained a passing hope I had been the sport of some optical delusion bred of sleeplessness and my somewhat dissolute night. But the sense of his words, as it reached me, speedily put such hope to flight.

“‘I have alarmed you, my poor Carlo,’ he said. ‘I have indeed alarmed myself. Recognition of the extent to which my powers of self-control and endurance have been undermined by illness, comes to me as a rudely distressing discovery. It comes to me as a warning also, forcing conviction upon me that the time for scruples is past.

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To hesitate, to procrastinate, under existing circumstances, would be contemptible. We are both called upon to brace ourselves to a cruel duty therefore — you to hear, I to speak.' And there, Father, he paused, looking at me in the old arresting, compelling way — closing his eyes, smiling, then opening them widely so that the whole circle of white showed round the iris. 'Innocently and inadvertently, in our recent conversation,' he continued, 'you touched upon a subject of vital and tragic moment to us both—a subject, I may add, ever present to my mind, but upon which, in consideration for your youth and desire for your happiness, I have condemned myself to rigid silence. But to continue that silence, after this conversation and in face of such undeniable proofs of my very precarious state of health, would be dishonourable towards you, towards myself, and above all towards her—your mother—whose wrongs and whose premature death we can neither of us cease perpetually to deplore.'

“Then, Father, it seemed to me that my

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heart ceased to beat. 'I am ready, tell me,' I said.

"But he put me off.—The crisis had taken him unawares. The existing conditions were unsuitable. He required time for thought, for preparation. He would spend the afternoon in retirement. He would dine in private. After dinner he would send for me. And with that he rose from his place, took my arm, and, when we reached the waiting carriage, dismissed me with a graceful wave of the hand and inclination of the head.

"Nature has no pity, Father. Mankind, in the mass, has no pity either. The great pagan festival, social and physical, went forward heartlessly. In the midst of it, my isolation seemed complete. Holding the ancient key of the door in the wall of Prince Amilcare's palace garden in my hand, I wandered in the glorious sunshine miserable, homeless in spirit, terror-haunted, and desolate."

CHAPTER III

“**H**AVE I slept? Is it night, Father?”

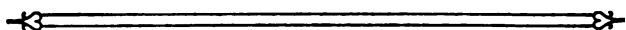
“Almost, my son.”

“And you still watch?—You are very patient. Indulge me a little, Father; for my body is as hopelessly chained to this hospital bed as ever was that of the blessed martyr, Laurence, to the grid-iron, and the poet cries out in me, feverish for movement and for space. Open the casements, here at the bed’s head, and look out. Tell me, are there any stars?”

“Not yet, my son. The afterglow is still too strong to permit their milder light. Behind the hills, westward towards Trasi-mene, the flames of the sunset linger; and above the flare of them the sky is orange, then fire-fly green, then white.”

“Yes, Father, yes. Tell me more. It

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soothes and comforts me bound here on the gridiron. You also are a poet, I think. You possess the God-given sixth sense which can pass behind the appearances of things and touch their essence. Let me look through your eyes then, for they really see. Tell me — this side of the hills, nearer, in the foreground, in the middle distance?"

"The plain is all vague, my son ; drowned in a sea of stagnant vapours, in which float dark islands crowned by dimly discerned villages and trees. Now a black-backed hot-glowing train, rushing south to Terni and to Rome, divides the vapours swiftly, which close behind it again as the waters of Jordan closed behind the journeying Israelite host. Nearer, the station buildings show blonde, pricked out with many lights. And the road, leading down to them from the Porta del Conca, shows blonde too against the dusky gardens and vineyards, the surface of it splashed with the darkness of moving vehicles, with groups of people and of animals, between its curving avenue of lamps."

"Ah, yes — yes — those dear pale roads,

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the length and breadth of Italy, down which the soldiers march sweating, parched with the clinging dust. I hear their hoarse cries and singing, and the steady tramp of their feet. — And the dear black trains too, those pulsing veins and arteries of our urgent modern world, going on — on — through day and night, knitting up nation with nation, circulating the life-blood of continents. — But it hardly does to think of all this, lying chained to the gridiron. It makes one restless, resentfully bitter against fate. For in my case, poor Brother, the Body will take no more journeys, whether by road or rail, save that last squalid journey to the graveyard, where the ghoul-like cypresses suck sustenance from the breasts and brains and limbs of the dead. — And that reminds me, Father. I have one very earnest request to make. I have money — I tell you I am rich. All my papers are in order. You will find them with my baggage at the hotel. Pay anything which is asked — whatever the authorities demand — only, as you hope for salvation,

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buy me a grave which will remain inviolate. Rescue that which is left when my soul passes out, the husk and shell of me, from the enormity of being dug up five or ten years hence and exported as mules' bones, to be ground down into some form of patent artificial manure. As between poet and poet, you'll admit, that is too grossly material a finish. Rescue me from it. And, if it can be, I want—I want to lie near the Prince. Get it done, Father, I implore you. You hear?—near the Prince."

"To arrange that will not be easy, my poor child; but I will do my best."

"All my blessings are yours, Father. For it would be very comforting to sleep near where Prince Amilcare sleeps. — He loved me greatly, as much as one man may love another in all honesty. — Ah! God in heaven, I remember. — The shame and the anguish come back. For he was murdered, foully murdered, the beautiful fierce Prince. — There! close the window, Father. Shut out the appeal of serene sky and strenuous land alike. I have nothing

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to do any more with either. And young boys are playing on the piazza just beneath. I can hear them call and shout, hear the race of their bare padding feet. They are alive and in health. They will grow to be men, Father ; will rejoice in their youth, dream the great dreams, drink, gamble, fight, be deliciously love-sick, deal with women, beget children, tear the guts out of life. — In pity close the window. Bar out the sound and thought of them and all that they stand for. Lying here, bound to my gridiron death-bed, I find it hurts too much. — Thanks. — You come back to your old place? Is this only the gatehouse of purgatory, Father, or purgatory itself, this endless, endless telling of a hateful tale? Still, you want to hear the rest? Well, by Bacchus, then you shall hear it, hot and strong, till you are glutted with the story of fraud and treachery and unnatural crime! Listen and look, while once more I go to work with the flaying-knife.

“As I told you just now, before that

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kind little sleep nestled to me, he—the husband of my dead mother—having led me to the verge of disclosure, delayed that disclosure under plea of a need for preparation. It was a closely calculated move in the villainous game, like all the rest. He proposed to reduce whatever force of opposition might yet remain to me, by suspense. Few things are more unnerving than the pause before a storm breaks ; and artificially to prolong that pause from noon to night, thereby weakening my will and tormenting my imagination, was his object. He proposed to starve out my reason and judgment as you might starve out a beleaguered garrison, reducing it through crying bodily need to a condition of irrational impulse. By the time he sent for me he believed I should be in such straits that he could impose his will upon me almost wordlessly, by suggestion, compelling me to such action as he wished. You must remember he had studied my temperament from infancy with a view to this long-determined and now imminent event. His con-

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centration of purpose made him infernally powerful, as well as infernally astute. I do not excuse myself, Father ; but, in truth, I had little enough chance, for he knew to the turn of a hair what I was made of, and consequently upon what he had to count.

“ Time and place were eminently well chosen too, his friend the Devil playing into his hands to secure telling effects. When he sent for me that night it was already late. In the town the carnival revels were at their height, accompanied by illuminations and fireworks ; and by the silent-travelling amazement of searchlights from the French battleships lying in the roadstead, which, at irregular intervals, conferred upon sections of the thronged streets, the promenades, the hotels and villas, the luxuriant vegetation and the adjacent heights, an arbitrary, unmitigated visibility. The result was at once apocalyptic and theatrical, fitly ironic prelude to some immense catastrophe. — And to all this his *salon*, as I entered it, offered an arresting contrast, calculated to stimulate one’s appreciation of

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his personal detachment and the dignity of his attainments. The shaded lamps disclosed tables loaded with carefully ranged books and manuscripts, along with a few vases of choice flowers, the offerings of his feminine admirers. I knew it all by heart, Father. For he carried his own atmosphere with him — an atmosphere of lofty and studious leisure, of untiring industry, untouched by modern eagerness and unrest. This hotel sitting-room, of which he was but passing occupant, offered an exact counterpart to rooms I could remember all my life long. Had some square of the carpet been littered with my toys, that would have caused me no surprise. I should have accepted it without question. The room, indeed, was inevitable. He himself was inevitable. Small wonder, then, if obedience to his authority, the doing of that which he demanded of me, should have proved inevitable likewise?

“ He stood facing the door as I entered, a massive armchair in front of him, upon the back of which he leaned his elbows.

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Vaguely, for the blood drummed in my ears, I heard him order his valet, as the man, after announcing me, turned to leave the room, to remain upon the corridor within call. Vaguely, too, I remarked that he fingered the knob of the ivory and lacquer cane of which I have already spoken, resting the ferrule of it on the seat of the chair. It was a recent acquisition, having been presented to him, so I understood, by a Japanese scholar of high rank, and it rarely left his hand. This, I own, annoyed me, since it appeared to me an object for a collector's cabinet rather than for a well-dressed man's daily use.

“ ‘I regret having been unable to summon you sooner, my dear Carlo,’ he began softly. ‘But I have suffered even more than usual to-day from exhaustion. Only concern for the anxiety you must be enduring, and a sense of the obligation I owe to your mother's memory, have given me force to overcome physical weakness and send for you at all to-night. I am warned that I should avoid agitation. Therefore, I must beg that our

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interview be, as far as possible, both calm and brief.'

“ ‘Yes, yes,’ I said.

“ ‘At some future time, when I am restored to health, if ever such a time should come, I will, if you require it, give you fuller details and incontestable proofs of that which I am about to tell you.’

“ ‘And, like a fool, Father, impelled partly by feverish impatience, partly by respect for his condition, I answered : — ‘Do not concern yourself about details. All I ask for are the facts, however baldly stated.’

“ ‘That is well,’ he said. ‘I am glad to receive this assurance of your trust in me.’

“ ‘But, of course,’ I replied, ‘I trust you.’

“ ‘He repeated that was as well ; adding that we had been parted for a considerable length of time, during which I must have been subject to alien and powerful influences. I protested, and truthfully, that I had never been disloyal. Experience had unquestionably modified my opinions on many subjects. I had gone away a boy, unformed in mind. I came back a man, knowing the ways of

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men — and of women, too, for that matter. But I still admitted his authority. The essential relation between us remained unaltered.

“ So far, Father, he had faced me. Now, though still leaning his elbows on the back of the chair and fingering his cane, he turned sideways and bent his head. In this position, the lamps being heavily shaded, I did not get a clear view of his face. Yet I could have sworn that, once again, his lips twisted into the grinning death’s-head smile which, as we sat that morning in the public pleasure-ground, had so horrified me.

“ ‘ Speak ! ’ I cried. ‘ Tell me, only tell me ! Certainty, however painful, is a thousand times better than this slow torture of suspense.’

“ Still he delayed before turning and looking at me. And, when at last he did so, behind the pitying suavity of his expression I seemed to catch the last flicker of that hateful and malignant smile.

“ ‘ Alas, my poor Carlo ! ’ he said, ‘ you have brought a little of the rough, unpolished

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trooper back with you from your barrack. You rush impetuously upon the fate from which I have so earnestly striven to shield you.'

“‘Speak!’ I cried, in answer. ‘Tell me, only tell me!’

“‘But his hands still played with the cane, pulling it, as it seemed, apart. Suddenly I observed the glint of steel, and understood a narrow sword was contained within that dainty ivory and lacquer case. This gave me the strangest sensation. Was he afraid of me, afraid I might use violence towards him, and had he therefore armed himself?

“‘‘Tell me!’ I said again, hoarsely. I was hurt by the idea that he distrusted and feared me. But this was calculated too. He intended to play upon my heart.

“‘‘In the course of our conversation this morning,’ he said, keeping his eyes fixed on the half-unsheathed sword, ‘innocently as I fully believe, you mentioned a name of very sinister significance to us both.’

“‘‘What name?’ I asked.

“‘‘That of the Prince Amilcare,’ he said.

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“The wild protest of an outraged friendship overflowed in me to the exclusion of all else. I went close to him, I stormed at him, demanding what conceivable thing, not wholly admirable and honourable, he could dare to advance against the Prince.

“‘This,’ he said slowly, looking up from the sword-blade and fixing me with wide-open eyes once more—for a sick man, Father, it must be conceded that his nerves were in remarkably good case—‘this, *Carlo mio*, that the Prince Amilcare was your mother’s lover.’

“Then, indeed, Father, the ultimate catastrophe was upon me. The room seemed to rock round me. At that moment the whole creation seemed to rock, shaken to its very base. There ceased to be any sure heaven above me, or solid earth beneath my feet. All reeled together into resounding chaos. The foundations of my love, my faith, my tenderest, most sacred memories, were plucked up ; and swept, light as dust, before a searching hell-wind of universal disillusion and distrust. I do not know

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how long a time elapsed. I do not know what I said or did ; but presently I found myself lying back in the massive chair. It had been wheeled close to an open window, and the freshness of the sea-breeze touched my face ; while below, growing boisterous in the last hours of the expiring carnival, the illuminated pleasure-town lay outstretched. And he, Father, he stood beside the chair looking intently down at me. His right hand rested on the head of his lacquered cane, but the blade was sheathed. He had found he could manage me without the help of that ; so, at least, I gathered as, through the pandemonium of sounds — shouting of crowds, braying of fog-horns and of bands, rattle and scream of dazzling fireworks — his delicately modulated voice reached me in accents of mingled cajolery and contempt.

“ ‘ Incontestably I have done well to pause and spare you as long as possible, my poor Carlo,’ he said, ‘ for, notwithstanding your broad shoulders and military bluster, you are but an emotional schoolboy yet. You pressed for the unvarnished truth. I gave

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it you with as little circumlocution as possible ; and, unfortunately, it proved unpalatable. It has nauseated you to the point of collapse. This distresses me. I would willingly conclude our interview ; but to do so would be unreasonable. I owe a certain duty to myself. Having gone thus far, there is more, which, in justice to myself, I am bound to tell you. I have prepared myself for the ordeal to-night. When once this subject is closed between us, I do not intend to re-open it. The pain and agitation which it causes me are too dangerously great. Therefore I must conjure you to control your sensibility and rally your fortitude while I speak.'

“ And I, again like a fool, Father, signed to him to continue. It would have been a thousand times better had I left him then, knowing but the bare fact, and had had time to reflect. But I was as clay in his hands, helpless with misery. This is the substance of that which he said : —

“ ‘ When my suspicions had been confirmed beyond all possibility of doubt, for

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your sake, Carlo, and for that of her reputation, I restrained my indignation. I remained outwardly on affectionate terms with your mother — my wife. We lived in the world, and I desired to avoid scandal. But, in the nature of things, the deception could not be maintained indefinitely. Circumstances arose which compelled her to choose between her child and her lover. She chose her lover. Upon this I offer no comment; nor would I have you judge her too harshly. She was young, romantic, impressionable, and, though imperious, intensely feminine in mind and in nature. Doubtless, moreover, the Prince Amilcare was at no loss for arguments, at once specious and powerful, wherewith to secure the fulfilment of his own designs. In any case, at his bidding she deserted you, her infant son, her only child. Upon her desertion of me I do not dwell. In every age the betrayed husband has been reckoned a ludicrous figure, upon which satirists may legitimately expend all the shafts of their wit. I turned to study, to high science, and the consolations

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which study brings. It was for you, and the immeasurable injury you had sustained, that I grieved. — As I say, she deserted you; and it is right that you should know that the reports which were in circulation respecting the closing period of her life were eminently disquieting. The Prince Amilcare is a world-famous sportsman — in less conventional terms, an insatiable butcher. The destruction of dumb animals had at this period, as one may suppose, ceased to satisfy his predatory instincts. He therefore indulged them by a more refined form of slaughter: — namely, that of a high-bred and beautiful woman's honour, her motherhood, and finally — what do I know? — the reports, as I tell you, were sinister in suggestion — by slaughter of the woman herself.' ”

Here the young voice, which, in the excitement of narration, had swelled to a resonant fulness, failed, stifled in the speaker's throat.

Out of doors, the twilight had given place to darkness. In the long range of whitewashed wall, the uncurtained windows showed like

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empty eye-sockets, gloomy cavities harbouring a strained and groping nullity of sight. The place was arrestingly still; the priest dumb; the whispered petitions of the white-habited Sisters frozen upon their gentle lips. Yet the whole length, breadth, and height of it, up to the painted gods upon the vaulted ceiling, was thick with angry, ghostly lamentation. The moan of the pain-stricken, the revolt of the dying, the bitter complaint, whether articulate or inarticulate, of all who had suffered within those four enclosing walls hung in the air—the vain, yet ever-renewed, protest of humanity against the awful symbol and legend stamped on the reverse of the otherwise glorious medal of earthly living, making itself evident with tragic distinctness. So much so, that even to those devout self-dedicated souls it came almost as a relief when the ill-conditioned little monkey-faced Neapolitan conscript, gripped in his sleep by the sense of immanent misery, broke incontinently forth into a volley of profane and filthy imprecations. Rising hastily, her chair scrooping harshly

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on the bare floor, the elder nun hastened to his bedside; while, behind the enclosing screens, the elder voice arose once more in accents of austere yet humble compassion.

“ My son, we are taught to pray, ‘ Give us here our purgatory.’ In your case, I can but believe that prayer has been very strangely and searchingly answered. The wrong-doing of others set alight penal and, I doubt not, purifying fires in which you, poor child, have burned. Now your vision is focussed exclusively upon the torment of your pain. In that fuller illumination which, as we believe, awaits each soul after death, it will take a wider range, embracing the whole purpose of your existence. Then, understanding, you will be reconciled. The sins of the fathers are visited upon the children—granted. But such visitation should be regarded as remedial rather than merely punitive—as payment of an hereditary debt of honour, the discharging of which not only sets free him who actually discharges it, but may also, in God’s everlasting mercy, be

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beneficial to those by whom that debt was originally contracted. Think thus of all that which you have endured and are now enduring, of all which remains hidden and mysterious in your lot. So will you gain peace and courage, since it will serve to sweeten remembrance of those erring ones who greatly loved you, and whom you still greatly love."

To all of which the young voice answered, with a weary playfulness: —

"Ah! yes, Father, yes — it may be. I heartily trust it is so. Only, you see, we have not reached the top of Calvary yet. For sin breeds sin, unluckily. Crime breeds crime. My sufferings may serve to lessen theirs perhaps — dear, beautiful, wilful creatures. Yet my evil doings may very effectually procure my own damnation all the same. For who shall dare to draw the line, crossing which a man ceases to be the sport of destiny and becomes the agent of free-will? — It is a nice point to determine, Father, where irresponsibility fairly ends and responsibility begins, eh? — Therefore, as I tell you, we have not reached the summit of Calvary.

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The steepest of the ascent remains. The skies threaten. Storm obscures the path. And I am spent, tired beyond all power of words adequately to express. —No—not in that way. Do not call the good Sisters. I am past the help of their cordials and drugs. Let me remain alone with you, Father. You are more than priest to me. Some human tie binds us. You have come so close to my heart that, if it were not presumptuous to knit up young worldling sinner with reverent saint, I could swear we were of the same family, the same blood. It comforts me strangely to see you, and to feel your touch. Will you raise me a little in the bed? —Ah! God in Heaven, but I am tired —tired. That is easier, Father—thanks.—Now, after this breathing space, to stumble on up the rugged mist-choked ascent.

“I asked no further explanation. I made no comment. My one thought was to get away from him, from his flowers, and books, and learning, from his scathing pity and inhuman calm. The latent antagonism which had recently existed between us became, on

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my part, militant. I was too bruised in spirit and in pride to feel very distinctly. Yet, even in that first moment, I knew that I ranged myself on my mother's side as against him; whilst the passion of revenge which shaped my subsequent action, though the outcome of his speech and influence, burned wholly on her account, not on his. He might stultify my will, Father, and wrock my judgment; but, thank God, he could not vitiate my heart.

“ I went back to my own rooms; and there must have been something desperate in my appearance, for the persons whom I met on my passage shrank away from me as from some fearful sight. I remember this, trivial though it may seem, because it marked a new departure in my experience. I was accustomed to flattering and favouring glances. This was the first instalment of the solitude, the rejection by my fellow-men, which—until you came to me to-day, Father—has pursued me ever since. Even in the midst of my wretchedness it surprised and shocked me. It is terrible, unspeakably terrible, to

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be outlawed from human approval. I flung myself down, dressed, upon my bed. I tried to think, tried to deal justly both with the present and the past. But, amid the echoes of the dying carnival, shame and dishonour stalked, hand in hand, back and forth over the parquet floor. There was no denying their presence. They had come — come to stay. And then some chord in my nature, hitherto silent—save on that wintry afternoon long ago in Marozzo's fencing-school, when I longed to nip the buttons off the foils—began to vibrate. I wanted to kill, Father, just to kill, to see and taste blood. There was no definite plan in my mind, only the blood-hunger driving me. I remembered that the mail-train to Genoa and Florence passed through between four and five o'clock. I had still time to catch it. My preparations were not elaborate. I went in the clothes I had on. I had worn them all day. I took money in plenty. I took a cloak of dark blue cloth, such as the townspeople commonly wear here, very wide and reaching about to the knee. I had used it as a disguise

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during the earlier nights of the carnival. I took the key which the Prince had given me, against the time I should come back to visit him. And I took another gift of his—a straight horn-handled hunting-knife, with a pointed waved blade to it about nine inches long. He had explained and praised its efficacy, if skilfully used, in the delivery of a *coup de grâce*. A revolver is, after all, but a clumsy, noisy mechanical weapon. A dagger of some sort is best, Father—if you have a poet's taste for the fitness of things, far best.

“After that I can recollect only a phantasmagoria of railway trains, of noise, sunshine, unknown companions, impatient waitings upon crowded station platforms; of towns, villages, endlessly diversified landscapes, reeling past; of an urgent need of going on and on, coupled with the vital excitement of drawing nearer and nearer to a partially realised yet profoundly alluring object, an object at once madly hated and madly loved.—Ah! was there ever so mighty a hunting, Father, such a tracking

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home of the quarry, or so noble a quarry to pursue? — And then, at last, trains and noise and fleeting landscapes no more ; but this — *this*, in its secular and stately beauty crowning the hill, seen in the chill translucent atmosphere of the young spring night! — The broad pale road winding up from the plain between the vineyards, and the orchards snow-powdered with pear and plum blossom ; the frowning cyclopean masonry of the city gate ; the labyrinth of ill-lighted back streets flanked by irregular high brown houses, through which I made my way to the great open space of the Piazza d'Armi ; and, finally, the cut-throat alley and the small iron-studded door of many adventures, cruel and merry, set in the palace garden wall. — What, Father, what — do you groan ? But, remember, you asked for it, asked to have the whole unexpurgated edition. And that, not wholly or solely as priest, in virtue of your sacred authority, but as man too — or I am very much mistaken — as one who has known the world and the ways of it, known those passions which

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go to create all world-famous dramas of revenge, and of sacrifice, of splendid self-devotion and almost equally splendid crime. — Well then, here it all is, this particular drama. Here it all is, I tell you, under your hand. Did I not warn you, just now, the worst of the journey still lay ahead? Is this climbing of Calvary too much for your fortitude, too much for your stomach and your heart, that you begin to recoil and to shrink? God knows I don't minimise the strain and disgust of it; or deny it is an ugly business and to spare. Only, repeatedly you have whipped me up, when I was disposed to falter. Now it is your turn to feel the lash. And, I swear by all the saints — with the Prince Amilcare here as witness moreover — that I will not let you off. Truss up your cassock, then, Father, truss it up; for in this matter of my own little private hill of Calvary, having gone thus far with me, step by step, step by step you shall climb beside me right to the very top."

To which violent adjuration the elder

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voice, after a brief pause, answered gently though proudly : —

“ There is no need for heated words, my son, Go forward, having no fear but that — although it be painful to me beyond all you can know or think — as friend, I will climb beside you to the summit ; and there, as priest, you being penitent, will absolve you from your sins at the foot of the Cross.”

“ Ah! Father, your forbearance is very sweet. It puts me to shame. Forgive my unseemly speech. I talk wildly. But indeed my brain is on fire as I recall that very different ascent — of the blind alley leading to the wicked little old door in the wall. I had hardly tasted food or drink for the past forty-eight hours. I had been without sleep. Yet, as the key turned in the lock, all sense of fatigue and confusion of mind dropped away from me. My thought grew clear ; my body quick and light. I understood quite well why I was there and what I had come to do. I would do it delicately, as a true artist, with perfection of workman-

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ship. There should be no bungling or clumsy haste. So I went joyfully, Father, glad as a man who at night seeks the house of his mistress, though my business was not to make love but treacherously to kill.

“ Once within, I slipped off my boots and socks, and walked barefoot across the garden and up the loggia steps. Fortunately there was no moon to betray me. Notwithstanding the chill night the glass doors of the museum were wide open. On the large buhl brass-mounted table, in the central gangway, stood tall silver candelabra with many candles, making an oasis of light in the dimness of the immense red-walled, white-columned room. Maps were spread upon the table. And before it, he—the Prince—sat sideways on a broad leather-covered stool. His right shoulder was towards me. An inch rule and pencil were in his hands. He bent down, measuring and marking out routes upon the maps. And, withdrawn on either side, with bright blind eyes, the stuffed beasts stood immobile and watched. I watched too, Father, a little minute. It

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gave me such exquisite delight to see him once again that I could have wept. But although I made no slightest sound he must have become suspicious of some alien presence; for, as I watched, he raised his head and looked round, at first with a superb arrogance, then with the wistfulness of one who waits and listens for a dearly desired guest. Once more I saw the face like the wind, the forked beard, and wonderful steel-grey eyes like the cold northern sea. But he had grown older, older, and his face was very sad.—Ah! my Prince, my beautiful fierce Prince, how my spirit yearned towards you! Love tore at my vitals, at the very roots of my being—do you hear?—I knew we were alone, Father. At that hour the servants would be shut away in their own distant part of the palace. You know—don't you—his passion for solitude?—Neither the museum, nor his bed-chamber adjoining it, might any of the household enter, under pain of immediate dismissal, unless summoned. We were quite alone then, he and I. I waited until he was busy again marking

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out routes upon the maps. I covered my left hand and arm with the folds of my cloak ; but I rolled it up high on my right shoulder so as to leave my right arm quite free. I ran, swift and silent as a greyhound in touch with a hare, across the space which divided us, threw my left arm round his neck, forcing his head back and smothering it in my cloak, while with my right hand I drove the hunting-knife in just below his left breast. It was like cutting into a water-melon, Father. I thought of that. The idea was monstrous, yet amused me. His clothes resisted, as the rind does. Then the long blade went through, with a sucking slush. He uttered no sound. He did not struggle ; only he sprang bolt upright, nearly carrying me off my feet so that my toes plucked at the floor. But I hung on to him. His body was hot against mine. I felt it quiver. I felt his breath exhaling in big heaving sobs. And I loved him madly, desperately, Father. And I rejoiced, knowing that he belonged to me now by right of conquest. He was mine, mine.

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He would never belong to any one else any more. I understood why I killed, Father. I killed because I loved—and I loved because I killed. It is always so, I suppose, with the hunter and the thing hunted, if you sift the emotion out. But, while I thought of these things, the tides of his life ebbed, leaving him deadly weak. He reeled, his whole weight was thrown on me. I kicked away the stool and held him closer, supporting him. But the blood began soaking down, soaking through. I could not bear to have it touch me; so, using all my strength, I lowered his body slowly, and laid him, at full length, on his back, upon the pavement. I slipped out of my cloak and knelt beside him. But I could not uncover his face yet—not just yet.

“I remember the sweat poured off me; for he was heavy, and it had been a tremendous exertion first to uphold him, and then to lay him down gently, with the respect due to his high rank and the great love which I bore him. After that, for a while, Father, remembrance fails me. I neither

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saw nor felt. I was brought back to myself by perception of a movement among the stuffed beasts. They had left their glass cases and wooden stands. Pushing and crowding upon one another in a great ring, they struggled to come close. The giant cats—tigers, leopards, jaguars—crawled low on their bellies. Above and between them ranged lean wolves ; cunning peering bears, reared upright or squatting on their hams ; grotesque armour-plated rhinoceros ; unwieldy bison, elk and big-horned sheep ; graceful deer and antelope ; and, tallest of all, towering high above the rest, a herd of elegant ungainly giraffes. Their hoofs and claws slid soundlessly upon the polished marble floor. Their hard varnished lips lifted from their teeth. Their soulless eyes glittered, straining to see. Even the heads, hung on the lofty red walls between the pilasters, craned whatever of neck was left to them through the dimness ; while each skin, outspread upon the ground, bristled along its crest. All these wild things, whose lives he had taken as a pastime and sport

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to allay the fever of his own tormented spirit, forced their way near, watching his death agony and gloating over it. They were there, on all sides, an enclosing wall whichever way I looked. I tell you, Father, it was unspeakably frightful. And then I understood that this was the event of which they had foreknowledge—the event regarding which they had held those voiceless pantomimic confabulations, with fantastic moppings and mowings, which more than once in my soldiering days, when I rested in this noble room, had made me start from my sleep and rush out into the fair garden, driven by a sense of horror I could neither combat nor control. I had returned here, as I had believed, to avenge a purely personal wrong. But they knew better. Unwittingly I had avenged their wrongs also. They had divined my mission from the first. They had expected me. Now they acclaimed me as the fore-ordained instrument of their vengeance, the executioner of their enemy, the messenger of death to him who to them had been death's messenger.

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And the perception of this made me beside myself, Father, inflaming me with a consuming fury. For they were beasts, beasts—dumb, brute beasts ; while he was a man, the fine flower of accomplishment, of courage, and honour, and high-breeding, a veritable master and born king among men. And she whom he had loved was a great lady—illustrious, talented, beautiful, a queen among women. And, whether for good or evil, he had loved her—I swear it, I know it—not lustfully, pushed by the blind necessity of mate for mate, as they, the beasts, love ; but as the famous lovers of all time have loved, with the mind and the intellect, with the glorious, the quenchless devotion of immortal souls. — Therefore, that these hoofed and clawed, insensate, four-footed things should dare associate themselves with her sorrows or my bitter act of justice, should exult over his agony, or claim me as the chosen avenger of their paltry lives, was an insult to corporate humanity, to the Divine Principle, to the Image of God resident in me and in him, and in every man, no to be endured.

“For he was dead now, Father—the Prince was dead. I threw away the hunting-knife. I knelt down, raised his right hand and felt it. It was clammy and limp. I kissed and kissed it. Somehow, though

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I had no feeling of remorse yet or of wrongdoing, I could not bring myself to uncover and kiss his face. Yes, he was dead. There seemed to me nothing more to do or to wait for. I had killed him because I loved him. He was past all chance of earthly pain or harm now — of that I was glad. So it was no act of desertion to leave him there, in his palace, among his hunting trophies of dead, harmless, stuffed beasts.

“ I rose and went towards the open doors on to the loggia. Still I was conscious of an immense distress in bidding him good-bye. The tears rained down my face. I turned and looked back. The great room was perfectly quiet. The Prince lay, as though in sleep, just as he may have lain a hundred times on the desert sands, or on some mountain side, or in the forest, very peacefully, his limbs composed, his head and breast shrouded in the dark cloak. But blood had flowed out of the open wound. It made a red blot upon the white and grey pavement. The little blocks of marble, here and there, were worn and chipped. The blood flowing

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over them took an evil shape in the shimmering candle-light—like the head of a lynx, with prick tufted ears, and a square bearded muzzle, infinitely malicious and alert.

“After all, did the beasts win, Father? Against man, as they are first in the world’s history, will they outlive him and also be the last?—That question tortured me. I could not answer it. I fled.

“The first pallor of the false dawn showed above the house-roofs in the East. But the garden was in blank darkness still; and the cold, the cruel keen-toothed cold, bit into my very marrow.”

CHAPTER IV

*“ De profundis clamavi ad te Domine : Domine
exaudi vocem meam.”*

“ Fiant aures tuæ intendentes in vocem deprecationis meæ.”

THUS, alternately to one another, the two nuns, seated on either side the clean scrubbed deal table. Their hands were idle. Each had laid aside her sewing, incapable of further mechanical effort. Their still faces, pinched and lined by the strain of long watching and of vicarious participation in the tragedy of crime and suffering in process of recounting behind those close-drawn screens, were blanched to the whiteness of the linen coifs which framed them. At first their thinly sweet accents had ached tremulously through the fear-stricken silence of the ward ; but, gaining in volume and strength as the recitation of the psalm proceeded, gave forth the

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concluding verses with a ring of ecstatic conviction and praise.

“Quia apud Dominum misericordia : et copiosa apud eum redemptio ;”

“Et ipse redimet Israel, ex omnibus iniquitatibus ejus.”

The silence settled down again, but less heavy, less blighting, until at last, his voice penetrated by hardly-mastered emotion, the priest spoke.

“Is your confession now finished, my son ?”

To which the penitent made answer : —

“No, Father — that is, if I am to obey your first instructions, and unburden myself of the whole hideous load I have borne since the carnival day when he — the devil’s spawn whom I trusted — thrust my soul into hell.”

“My instructions remain the same, my son.”

“Ah, but, Father, a steepish bit of Calvary hill still rises ahead of us ; and you are spent with climbing.”

“And what, in God’s name, am I here for, save exactly that — to spend and to be spent ?”

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“All is well then. And, God knows, I most thankfully accept the gift of your companionship as priest; but even more just now as man, perhaps, Father. — Dare I say as kinsman?”

“I climb beside you, my poor child, however long and steep the way. Let this suffice.”

“Yes, yes, the dying are selfish, I’m afraid, and exacting. Bidding farewell to so much, they are tempted to clutch with unseemly desperation of demand at the hand held out in pity to them. Small wonder — specially in the case of a worldling like myself, who carries but the littlest taper of faith along with him into the enormous and ironical darkness. — Only I would like to have you know, Father, that, whereas at the outset, this confession was repugnant to my natural pride and even to my sense of decency, it has come to be strangely comforting. I find in it relief and reconciliation. Through it I am restored to human fellowship. And something beyond even this, Father. For, in telling you, I seem to tell

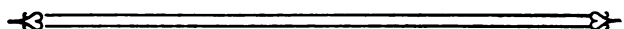
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the Prince Amilcare also — seem to make my heart, my nature, and the sources of my action plain to him — though whether because he is here, as witness, actually present at my bedside in spirit, or whether because of some intimate bond existing between him and you, some profound and primitive sympathy uniting you to one another, I cannot pretend to determine.”

“Nor will I attempt to do so, either, my son. I neither affirm nor do I deny, since here we touch mysterious and hidden things outside the practical scope of our inquiry. Be satisfied to speak. I listen. And, in speaking, accept with humble fearlessness whatever of comfort may graciously be vouchsafed you.”

“I got away then, Father, by the tortuous back streets of the city and down the road to the railway station. My brain and heart were paralysed, devoid of sensation. I knew neither sorrow nor remorse. A dead indifference possessed me. I had no dread of recognition. I had never been seen here save in the uniform of a private soldier, and

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the hour was very early. Few people were stirring as yet. But, indeed, the idea of concealment from possible discovery and pursuit never occurred to me. All my perceptions were blunted. I had fallen into a brutish state, in which the action of my higher faculties was arrested. Only physical cravings for food and sleep were present to me. The desire to gratify these filled my whole outlook; and an impatient sense of being very cold. I remember wondering, resentfully, why I was without my cloak. The restaurant was not open; I could get nothing to eat. But there was a train standing in the station, and on it a through first-class carriage for Florence and Pisa. I remember the welcome close warmth of the empty compartment as I entered it; and the relief and luxury of flinging myself down, at full length, upon the well-padded seat and giving myself over to slumber.

“After that, Father, comes a vacant space, whether of hours or days I have never discovered. Events supervened which rendered inquiry objectless. So it remains a time

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dropped out of my life, of which my mind holds no smallest record. I only know that eventually I found myself on a wide quay, thronged with figures and encumbered with all descriptions of merchandise, bordering the inner harbour of a great southern seaport. It was a typical March day, of dazzling sunshine, purple shadows, and racing, eddying clouds of dust. The dry wind sang aloud in the wire rigging of the serried ranks of ships, clattered the wooden shutters of the tall painted houses, tore at the flounced red and yellow striped awnings of the *cafés* and shops, whipped the patches of open water between the dark hulls of the ships into glittering white-capped waves. Around me rose the clamour of labour, the urgent voices of a busy, vivacious, hot-blooded, quarrelsome, gay-natured population. The note, both of colour and sound, was strident. Almost insolently it challenged attention. Through my eyes and ears it beat upon my brain, exciting my torpid imagination, making me consciously observe and think. But thinking appeared in some respects a singu-

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larly difficult process. I recognised the clothes that I wore, as having seen them before. I recognised my own hands and feet. I was aware that I was young, and in full possession of my senses and of bodily health. But there, Father, all power of thought in relation to myself ceased. I had no recollection of my name, of my profession, of my home, my family, my social standing. I could recall no event or incident, no place or person, that linked me with an intelligible past. Who I was, what I was, I had no faintest idea. I realised that I stood as though new-born in the face of the immediate present, grown man though I was. The noise and movement of the crowded quays and harbour appealed to me. The squeal of pulleys and blocks, the rattle and clang of machinery as the great cases and bales of goods swung ashore, the sunburnt, blue-clad dockers and porters rallying to their heavy work, the swarthy bearded sailors emerging from the ships' holds on to deck, stripped to the waist, their muscular arms and shoulders glistening with grease and sweat

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— all this was instinct with a rough and virile poetry which I could grasp. But of myself, Father, of my identity, my upbringing, my acquirements, nothing — nothing. I could look intelligently around me. I could look forward. But, attempting to look back, I found only a dark abyss, void, meaningless, yet somehow very sinister, the risks of exploring which I felt might prove — indeed, must prove — incalculably great.

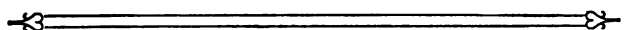
“ It happened that I was standing near rows of wine casks, just unloaded from a large sailing vessel. Now her cargo was discharged she rode high in the water, the cobalt and ochre painted carven stern of her towering high above the grey levels of the quay. Under the blistering sunlight pungent heady fumes were given off by the wine casks ; and, in my present abnormal condition, these fumes affected me, exciting me as a potent dram might. I reviewed my own position, the facts and results of it, with unnatural fearlessness and lucidity. — I would subscribe without reserve to that obliteration of my past life. I would make no effort to

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resuscitate the experiences of it. I repudiated any attempt to explore that sinister void. All that had been, until this present hour, should be to me as though it never had been. I would go forward, creating new relations, new ambitions, a whole new experience. I utterly refused to look back. And with that, Father, an immense exultation invaded me. I seemed to rise to heights of unimagined freedom. An arrogant delight of personal liberty, of immunity from all conceivable obligation, possessed me ; and more, a vivid conviction of escape from nameless disaster and sorrow, of enlargement from some intolerable prison-house, in which, since infancy, my mind and nature had been contorted and confined. I revelled in the thought that I was free, superbly free ; that I belonged to myself and to myself alone ; and that a future, magnificently uncompromised, belonged to me.

“ Ah ! if this fine illusion of immunity could have but lasted, Father ! — Was ever a stranger, or more captivating perspective presented to any mortal than this facing of life, with the intellect and equipment of a grown

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man, and the unsullied record of a little child? I am glad to remember that, in this moment of supreme emancipation, no base or selfish ambition of personal wealth or power stirred in me. It was not the call of fame or of conquest which inspired me, but rather the stern and strenuous call of labour. I looked at the hundreds toiling around me in the tremendous sunshine, men of many nationalities and many types, and the solidarity of the world which works came home to me. I asked nothing soft of the future. I yearned to go down among those workers and become one of them, entering the great family of labour on equal terms; eating bread of my own earning, sharing the rude pains and pleasures, the brutal tragedies, the coarse delights, the fleeting wistful ecstasies of those who deal with the raw material of civilisation, with untamed humanity and untempered Nature, at first hand. The turbulent storm-driven music of life as it is lived by the masses, its hymns of hope, its idyllic or truculent love songs, its wailing dirges of suffering, poverty, despair and crime, rang in my ears.

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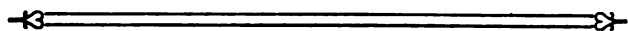
“ And then, Father, then, suddenly, in the midst of my exaltation and wide ranging vision, something personal, concrete, and for the moment incomprehensibly agitating, arrested my attention. A group of some three or four soldiers, detaching themselves from the crowd in front of the shops and *cafés*, loitered across the roadway towards me. They were mere youths, evidently new to the service, self-conscious and uneasy in their rawly red and blue uniforms. They laughed and nudged one another clownishly, pointing at the shipping, staring at it with the suspicious ignorance of peasants from far inland. I watched them, at first vaguely interested; but, as I watched, I became aware of the movement of undeterminate threatening shapes within the void abyss of the past, against exploration of which I had just registered so positive a vow. I grew sensible that these smooth-faced country-bred lads had some connection with that obliterated former life of mine. They claimed me, though unconsciously, thereby endangering the integrity of my

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precious freedom ; and I shrank from their presence in swift fear of more definite revelation of the tie which I felt bound me to them. I could have called aloud, commanding, imploring them, in pity to go elsewhere and pass out of my sight. But they remained stupidly smoking, idling, impressed by, yet jealous of, the brave mystery of the ships. They, as I judged, were homesick ; and, to keep up their spirits, had drunk more than was good for them, with the result that their talk was at once maudlin and gross. But it was not this which troubled me. It was that their appearance, and the nature of their calling, became momentarily more and more suggestive to me, compelling me, whether I would or no, to make an effort of memory, to look back into the void and think.

“ I had been leaning against one of the great wine casks. Now I straightened myself up. I fought against thought. I dreaded remembrance. I prayed to be delivered from clearer seeing of the undeterminate and threatening shapes peopling

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the abyss. I could endure the neighbourhood of those red and blue uniforms no longer. If the soldiers would not go, I must. But as I moved, Father, looking down, I saw — I had not observed it before — that the cask was leaking. A sluggish stream oozed from the bung-hole and soaked down over the rounded side. This leakage must have been going on for some while, for the wine had formed a pool, upon the surface of which the sunshine shimmered causing it to smoke. And the pool was red, Father, red as newly-shed blood. And the shape it had taken was strange and evil, owing to holes and joints and worn places in the paving of the quay. It was like the head of a lynx, with tufted prick-ears and bearded muzzle, infinitely malicious, watchful, and alert."

The young voice, heretofore restrained and steady, faltered and broke. Whereupon the elder voice made response, broken, too, yet quick and compassionate : —

"Alas, my poor child, in your case, the way of the transgressor has, indeed, been

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hard. Still, in that very hardness, may you not read a message of grace ? ”

“ Perhaps, Father. I would gladly believe so. But immediately the anguish was great. To have the very stones bear witness, printing themselves with that bloody symbol — think of it, only think of it ! For a little space I stared, fascinated, horror-stricken, yet unable to comprehend. Then Memory leapt on me, as lightning leaps from the womb of the storm-cloud scathing and splintering that which it strikes. In an instant the dark backward abyss was filled — like some yawning, seething crater-mouth — with living flame, in which I beheld my dear imagined freedom, and all the wide and noble promise of it, perish, utterly consumed. The wind no longer sang aloud in the rigging of the serried ranks of ships. The sun grew cold in the shuddering sky. The strenuous call of labour was silenced. The busy, lusty crowds faded out like companies of unsubstantial ghosts. And I was left desolate, Father, isolated from all created things ; but knowing my own life

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now from earliest infancy, with a minute unmitigated precision and certainty of detail — no thought, no tendency, no influence; no event or action left out — while I seemed to stand, once more, in the chill small hours of the morning, on the threshold of the hall of stuffed beasts in Prince Amilcare's palace, he lying dead, the dark cloak across his face, upon the marble floor at my feet. — Ah! the red blot, Father, the red blot, everywhere from that time onward, the long-drawn, accusing, pursuing, destroying torture, to heart and senses, of the red blot! — Yes — yes — it is too much — I must wait a little, and recover myself. For I refuse to let grisly Master Death snatch my soul, un-awares, while it struggles, as now, beating its wings in impotent effort of flight like some poor scared bird in a net. When he comes he must find me calm, even debonair, ready to go courteously and without any ugly business of compulsion. — But let me feel the touch of your hands again, Father. It quiets me. Like that — yes, I am grateful. Wipe my foolish wet eyes.

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Raise my head. — No, do not call the Sisters. I want no women here, whether brides of heaven or brides of earth. Their presence introduces an element best forgotten at this pass—eh, Father?—since it tends slightly to confuse the issues. In my extremity I want only the man, the strong man, and the priest. — There, I am sane once more, and master of myself. I can tell you the rest.

“Late that same night I reached the hotel at Nice where I had left him — him, the husband of my dead mother. From the moment Memory leapt on me, Father, I knew that I had to explain to him that his long-planned devil’s errand had been duly accomplished. It was done — done, the thing which he required of me. And now what had he to say? What was the reward of my service! — He had to speak, to tell me, to justify himself to me, justify me to myself, if that last was in any degree possible. I am young, Father, and in youth one still carries the child-mind in one, with its splendid defiance of finality and of the tyranny of accomplished fact, its unquenchable faith in the

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possibility of rescuing miracle. Against all experience and all reason, the child in me clung to a hope that the door was not quite shut on happiness. Something unknown to me, something I had overlooked, would disclose itself, must do so, redressing the balance and mitigating the intolerable wretchedness of the present. And, with an illogic born of desperation, it was to him I turned as instrument of that redress. Yes, though the red blot was before my eyes, I still retained a measure of trust in him; and still more did I retain the silly sweet child-faith that life cannot play one false, and that its enchanting promises will be repaid in true coin at last.

“Picture then, Father, the revulsion of feeling with which I learned, on my arrival, that a gala dinner of thirty covers had been given, that same evening, in his honour by a personage of exalted rank. It had been one of the most brilliant events of the Riviera season, high society and high science joining hands to do homage to this charming man of the world and world-famous savant. I found the

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hotel all agog with excitement ; for, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, the distinguished guests had only now dispersed, leaving the object of their adulation to return to his own apartments and rest. Of the cruel experiences of the day, this homecoming, in its bitter irony of contrast, was certainly not the least cruel. Considering the circumstances under which he and I had parted, and his total ignorance of what had become of me, it surely argued an almost inhuman callousness that he should embrace the present as a suitable moment for this public apotheosis. — Was it conceivable that, though he made use of me, he cared nothing for me ? — that his apparent affection and solicitude were simulated, a skilfully cloaked and painted lie ? More than ever must I see him. I must know. I must drag the innermost meaning and purpose of his dealings with me into clear daylight. I did not wait to make any change in my dress. I went, travel-stained and unkempt as I was. Once and for all he should answer. — The need to

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kill was upon me again, Father. But this time the killing was not from desire of possession, killing from excess of love; but killing to exterminate, killing as one kills a creature altogether vile and poisonous of which it is the duty of any clean man to rid the fair face of the earth—killing for loathing as you kill vermin, killing for hate.

“Still I went softly, Father. I wanted to bait the creature, to corner and torture it, before I killed. When I opened the door of his *salon*, the well-known aspect of the room—tables loaded with books and manuscripts, vases of choice flowers, the reposeful light of shaded lamps, the refined and cultured leisure of the place—withstood me, seeming to deprecate my rude intrusion and warn me off with supercilious authority. He was still in evening-dress, a dignified and eminently civilised figure. He stood near a table in the centre of the room. He fingered a wreath of bronze oak-leaves, tied with gold and silver ribbons, examining, almost caressing it. Disturbed by the sound of the opening door, he laid the exquisitely

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fashioned thing down upon the table, raised his shoulders, and spread out his pale, angular hands, then let them drop at his sides, as he said with a delicate inflection of irony:—‘A crown for the sage, for the victor; or for the corpse—which?’

“A good minute or more he remained lost in thought, contemplating the wreath; then he added coldly, evidently supposing his valet to be the intruder:—‘It was unnecessary for you to return, Hartmann. I prefer to be alone. I require nothing further. You have prepared my sleeping draught and put it upon the bed-table?’

“He looked round as he made this inquiry, saw me, and his countenance became convulsed. But the effect was passing. Almost before I had time to register it, he had regained his accustomed composure.

“‘You, my dear Carlo!’ he exclaimed. ‘Pardon me if I did not instantly hail your advent with enthusiasm. The suddenness of your disappearances and re-appearances is a little disconcerting. I am afraid I must plead guilty to finding these repeated *coups*

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de théâtre fatiguing, in my existing, none too robust physical condition.'

“ ‘It is for me to apologise,’ I answered. ‘But what would you have? Hearing, on my arrival, of the interesting event this evening—an event gratifying in the highest degree to my filial pride—how could I do otherwise than hasten to offer you my felicitations?’

“ ‘You are extremely kind, even if a trifle impetuous, *Carlo mio*,’ he answered. ‘It is a matter for regret that you could not have so timed your return as to be present at this agreeable dinner. Needless to say, your handsome looks and imposing inches, quite irrespective of your connection with myself, would have made you a most welcome guest.’

“ He stood with his back to the table, resting one hand on the edge of it. He addressed me with the utmost suavity, yet I observed that he glanced furtively about the softly lighted and luxurious room, as though in anxious search of some particular object. On a chair by me, near to the door,

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along with his fur-lined overcoat, lay the lacquer and ivory sword-stick of which he was so fond. And it occurred to me, witnessing those singular and furtive glances, that he was afraid of me, afraid of some personal violence, afraid vaguely, yet hauntingly; and that he looked for the sword-stick as a weapon of defence. With that, excitement took me—an infernal, relentless gaiety which must have danced very terribly in my eyes and played about my mouth. I picked up the sword-stick and went nearer to him.

“ ‘Is this what you are looking for?’ I asked. ‘But believe me you have no need of it to-night. Our present interview differs altogether in scope and in sentiment from our last one, when you had painful facts to relate. For I am here, now, not only to offer you my congratulations upon the honour done you by all those celebrated people, but to bring you good news on my own account. See, I have only absented myself so as to fulfil your desires. During my absence I have acted as your most

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dutiful, your most obedient emissary. I have spared nothing — nothing, in the effort to carry out your wishes and gain your approbation. No hired bravo, no paid assassin, could have served you with more reckless or detestable loyalty. Therefore it is clear that you have no need of, nor use for, this pretty little murderous conceit of an Oriental cane now we are here alone together to-night. It, indeed, constitutes something of a reflection upon my good faith and upon your affection for me. That is not permissible. — Come, let's do away with it!'

“ And thereupon, Father, taking it by the two ends, I snapped the costly thing across my knee, and threw the broken blade and splintered sheath on the rug at his feet, while fragments of ivory inlay, scattering in all directions, rattled like a charge of small shot over the parquet. He gave a sharp exclamation, closing his eyes and grasping the table behind him — the table on which lay the bronze oak wreath — with both hands. He was angered and pro-

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foundly agitated, yet he maintained his self-control.

“ ‘But this is a wanton and stupid outrage,’ he said. ‘Have you suddenly become insane, or are you only disgracefully drunk?’ ”

“ ‘I am both — both,’ I answered, ‘but not in consequence of cerebral derangement or over-indulgence in liquor. Listen — and may it reach your heart, if in that desiccated emasculated scholar fine-gentleman body of yours any heart is left. — I am mad with misery, drunk with the horror of bloodshed, for which you and you only are responsible. — Praise me then!’ I cried. ‘Console me. Embrace me. Make restitution to me, by a very splendour of parental devotion, for all I have suffered and done for your sake.’ — And I meant it, Father. The appeal was genuine. All the long habit of years, my reverence for his great gifts, for his immense learning and untiring industry, my appreciation of the charm and force of his unique temperament, combined with an irrational childish hope that things were otherwise than I knew them

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to be, hope that even at the eleventh hour — by means of some beneficent miracle — he might be cleansed from the reproach of vile duplicity and I from that vilest crime, found expression in that prayer. For it was nothing less than a prayer — the despairing, passionate outcry of my soul, not alone to him, but to Almighty God. But on him, at least, Father, my prayer was wasted as water spilt on desert sand. He trembled from head to foot, but he remained obdurate. He even tried — and I could not but admire his audacity — that old trick on me of wide open eyes, showing the white all round the iris, and of thin-lipped flickering smile.

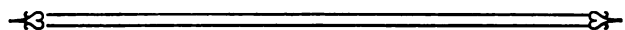
“ ‘ Pray, my dear Carlo,’ he said, ‘ spare me any more of these hysterical ravings. They neither interest me, nor in the smallest degree command my sympathy, since — you must pardon my saying it — they argue a level of intelligence and emotion as uncultivated as it is ill-bred. If, as you inform me, you have news which you want to communicate to me, in heaven’s name tell me simply, without nauseating mock-heroics.

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And, the news being told, let us bring this disagreeable, and, in some respects, very ridiculous scene to a close.'

“ The insolence of his words and manner cut me like a whip, arousing all my anger and pride. For, by Bacchus, who was he, Father, that he should treat me thus as an imbecile or a dog? The mere animal lust of killing in me had given place to something more intellectual and elaborate. To let the life out of his body was not enough. I wanted to dominate him, to abase him, to trample upon his mind and his soul. Then began a deadly struggle between us, will matched against will, intention against intention, personality against personality. It was silent, for we fought not with words, still less with our hands. We had got away into that mysterious and awful region, where the conditions of matter cease to bind, and where human thought wrestles naked with human thought. And as the minutes passed, now, as in Marozzo's fencing-school long ago, I proved the stronger. Youth won, Father, glorious youth won. I saw his will weaken

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under the fury and dexterity of my onset. His eyes faltered. Fear blinked in them as his glance wandered desperately to the closed doors of the vestibule giving on to the corridor, to the half-drawn crimson *portière* masking the archway leading to his bed-chamber, to the pushes of the electric bells on either side the fire-place, to the telephone fixed against the wall. But he recognised that it was useless to attempt to reach either and summon help. For I not only stood there opposite to him, silently wrestling with him, thought to thought, but my presence filled the whole room, so that wherever he looked he found me barring each avenue of escape. That unmitigated precision of memory, which had come to me when I beheld the lynx-head stain of red wine steaming in the sun-heat upon the grey pavement of the quay, remained with me still. And I used it on him, Father. I visualised every event of our past life together, every place we had visited, function we had attended, incident in which we had both played a part. And I compelled him to visualise them too. As

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helpless baby, as motherless child, as growing boy, as youth eagerly curious of the splendour of living, as grown man in the flower of his strength, I presented myself to him. I presented, moreover, his purposes concerning me from my very birth—as I understood them—the influences he had brought to bear on my mind and character, the hundred insidious means he had adopted to train and shape me to the commission of one particular deed. Wherever he looked, he found me, nothing but me. He could not elude, or deny, or juggle with, or deceive, or ignore me, any more, as I—the multiple images and phases and aspects of me—crushed in upon his brain and consciousness. Yet all the while I remained perfectly still, barely a couple of yards away, watching, watching, while his will went down before mine, his powers of resistance relaxed, and he became dazed and faint with the strain of that implacable seeing. I had grown cruel. Infernal gaiety again possessed me, and I spoke.

“ ‘ You ask to hear the good news which I

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bring you?' I said. 'Well, this is the good news—this—this—I have done the thing which you have demanded of me, without mercy or intermission, all my life. I have realised the idea with which you indoctrinated me, translating it into accomplished fact. I have killed the Prince Amilcare. He is dead—dead, in his ancient palace among the spoils of his mighty huntings. I took the key of the door in the wall, which he gave me in token of his deep and abiding affection. I came upon him treacherously in the small hours of the night. I stabbed him to the heart with his own hunting-knife. I vanished like an evil dream at cock-crow, leaving him lying lonely in the red terror of his blood. This is the good news I am here to tell you. Is your honour vindicated? Are you glad? And am I not very, very dear to you? Are you satisfied, revenged, triumphant, at last?'

“He had turned away, cowering, queerly crouched together, over the table. But as I finished speaking he faced me again, by an immense effort holding himself stiffly erect.

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In his hands was the wreath which his admirers had given him.

“ ‘Bastard — parricide — incarnate shame of an adulterous woman!’ he cried. ‘The long comedy of lying is over between us. You are no child of mine. More than ever do I abhor you. Get out of my sight!’

“ But his knees gave and he lunged forward, as though struck from behind by a heavy blow. He would have fallen, had I not caught him in my arms, Father, and led, or rather carried, him to a chair. He collapsed into it shapelessly. His face — showing livid against the crimson brocade of the chair-back — was distorted, drawn crooked, his lips twisted into a grinning death’s-head smile. His were eyes appalling in their concentration of vindictive hatred. But, though he mouthed at me, he was speechless, while his numb and nerveless hands clutched, with a terrible avidity of possession, at the bronze oak wreath.”

CHAPTER V

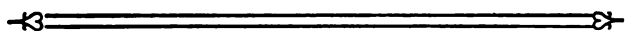
A STILLNESS in the city without ; and in the hospital ward a stillness too, that of prolonged suspense and waiting which thankfully nears its appointed close. Then once again, feebly, yet with the graciousness of final resignation, the young voice asked : —

“Are you still here, Father? Yes?— Faithful to the end, for it is the end, I think.—I have slept, losing myself among visions which were not unkindly, neutral-tinted, soothing to the ache of lacerated nerves. Now they have passed. I see clearly and know myself again. Know, too, that Master Death plucks somewhat roughly at my sleeve. I cannot deny him any longer. Still he’s a good fellow, since, with all the business he has to do week in and week out, up and down the length and breadth

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of the earth, he has been patient, giving me time to tell you the whole grievous tale. For I have told it all, Father, all. I have not minimised my own guilt, whether of thought or action; or consciously withheld anything from you. — As to the time which has passed between the night when, in the hotel at Nice, I called servants and doctors to minister to that dumb living corpse, with its malignant stare and hideous *rictus*, until to-day when, the little soft-nosed rifle-bullet having failed—mercifully, as I now recognise, since through its failure I was spared to find you—to do its business, they brought me here to hospital, there has been only the red blot, always the red blot and the pursuing anguish of it. I need not dwell on that, Father; on the abiding horror of having killed not only my friend, but he who gave me life.—Yes, in good truth, we have climbed Calvary hill to the summit! There is not any further to go.—Again Master Death plucks at my sleeve.—Quick, then, quick, do your merciful promised part, Father; lest I embark on the

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sea of perplexed unfathomable conjecture, which for ever laps the coasts of life, — dear, gallant, laughing life as living men know it — alone with Death for pilot, before the assuaging, cleansing words are spoken. Quick, Father! For all my sins I am penitent. And I forgive him — yes, even him — the author and procurer of so many of them — even as I hope to be forgiven. So grant me absolution. Time presses. Let me die at peace.”

The white-habited nuns, with meekly folded hands and bowed heads, knelt on either side the clean-scrubbed table. The monkey-faced, foul-mouthed conscript murmured a broken “Hail Mary!” in his sleep. While the elder voice, sorrowful, yet serene in the assurance of divinely delegated authority, gave forth the supreme message of acquittal and of hope.

The Sisters rose from their knees, a light in their eyes, a sweetness of repose upon their white faces — they having communed with the Eternal Compassion and being revived by that blessed communion. With a

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grunt of animal comfort the conscript turned on his side, stretching lazily in his warm bed. Only the painted gods upon the vaulted ceiling—Ganymede in the lustful embrace of his god-eagle lover, Bacchus lighting down from his panther-drawn chariot, pot-bellied Silenus amid rout of wanton nymphs and goat-shanked satyrs—remained unmoved, hard-eyed, indifferent, hedged about by the magnificent heartlessness of the classic idea.

From the Corso, at first attenuated by distance and dulled in tone by the intervening palaces and houses, arose the sound of bugles and the swinging tramp of a regiment marching back to quarters through the resonant ways of the stone-built, rock-seated town. The sound swelled to a roar and clangor as the throng passed across the mouth of the narrow side-street; softened gradually to a confused murmur, to fine thin echoes, and then ceased. But the young voice broke the succeeding quiet, in hurried, joyful accents:—

“Father, Father, do you see them? They are here. They have come, refusing to

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let me face the awful voyage alone with grisly Death. Look—Father—look, on the right hand and the left!—Welcome, my Prince, my beautiful fierce Prince—and you, too, beautiful beloved mother, for whom my poor orphaned heart has mourned so long. Dear God in Heaven, praise and thanks, everlasting thanks that Thou hast let them come! Now farewell World—farewell Life! I kiss my hand without tears to you both at parting, after all, not slightly though, not disdaining your many enchantments and opportunities; but because They have come, you see, the two whom I love, and love of them outweighs all else, constraining me. — Great Prince and hunter, infinitely desired mother, I am ready. Nothing hinders. Let us go! ”

After a time the priest rose from his place. He leaned across the bed, looking long and earnestly at the dead man—his brother's son, the last of his race—golden-haired, too, and, notwithstanding his youth, with a face like the wind and eyes like the grey northern sea. He bent low, kissed the dead cheek,

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made the sign of the cross upon the forehead, the lips, and breast. Then drawing aside the screen, which scooped a little on the bare boards of the floor, a very tall, austere, black-robed figure, he passed out into the ward—his work of mercy done.



